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FOLLE-FARINE

—
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FOLLE-FARINE.

FOLLE-FARINE.

BY OUIDA, *pseud*

AUTHOR OF "UNDER TWO FLAGS," "PUCK," "TRICOTRIN," ETC.

De la Ramée, Louise

"Un gazetier fumeux qui se croit un flambeau
Dit au pauvre qu'il a noyé dans les ténèbres :
Où donc l'aperçois-tu ce Créateur du Beau ?
Ce Rédresseur que tu célèbres ?" BAUDELAIRE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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BOOK V.

“If I love thee, what is that to thee?”



FOLLE-FARINE.

CHAPTER I.

“**O**NLY a little gold!” he thought, one day, looking on the Barabbas cartoon.
“As much as I have flung away on a dancing-woman, or the dancing-woman on the jewel for her breast. Only a little gold, and I should be free; and with me *these*.”

The thought escaped him unawares in broken words, one day, when he thought himself alone.

This was a perpetual torture to him, this captivity and penury, this aimlessness and fruitlessness, in which his years were drifting, spent in the dull bodily labour that any brainless human brute

could execute as well as he, consuming his days in physical fatigues in order that a roof he despised might cover him, and a bread which was bitter as gall to him might be his to eat; knowing all the while that the real strength which he possessed, the real power that could give him an empire amidst his fellows, was dying away in him as slowly but as surely as though his brain were feasting fishes in the river mud below.

So little!—just a few handfuls of the wealth that cheats and wantons, fools and panders, gathered and scattered so easily in that world with which he had now no more to do than if he were lying in his grave,—and having this little, he would be able to compel the gaze of the world, and arouse the homage of its flinching fear, even if it should still continue to deny him other victories.

It was not the physical privations of poverty which could daunt him.

His boyhood had been spent in a health-giving and simple training, amidst a strong and hardy mountain-people. It was nothing to him to make his bed on straw; to bear hunger unblenchingly; to endure cold and heat, and all the freaks and changes of wild weather.

In the long nights of a northern winter he had

fasted for weeks on a salted fish and a handful of meal; on the polar seas he had passed a winter ice-blocked, with famine kept at bay only by the flesh of the seal, and men dying around him raving in the madness of thirst.

None of the physical ills of poverty could appal him; but its imprisonment, its helplessness, the sense of utter weakness, the impotence to rise and go to other lands and other lives, the perpetual narrowness and darkness in which it compelled him to abide, all these were horrible to him; he loathed them as a man loathes the irons on his wrists, and the stone vault of his prison-cell.

“If I had only money!” he muttered, looking on his Barabbas, “ever so little—ever so little!”

For he knew that if he had as much gold as he had thrown away in earlier time to the Syrian beggar who had sat to him on his house-top at Damascus, he could go to a city and make the work live in colour, and try once more to force from men that wonder and that fear which are the highest tributes that the multitude can give to the genius which arises amidst it.

There was no creature in the chamber with him, except the spiders that wove in the darkness among the timbers.

It was only just then dawn.

The birds were singing in the thickets of the water's edge; a blue kingfisher skimmed the air above the rushes, and a dragon-fly hunted insects over the surface of the reeds by the shore; the swallows, that built in the stones of the tower, were wheeling to and fro, glad and eager for the sun.

Otherwise it was intensely silent.

In the breadth of shadow still cast across the stream by the walls of the tower, the market-boat of Yprés glided by, and the soft splash of the passing oars was a sound too familiar to arouse him.

But, unseen, Folle-Farine, resting one moment in her transit to look up at that grim grey pile in which her paradise was shut, watching and listening with the fine-strung senses of a great love, heard through the open casement the muttered words which, out of the bitterness of his heart, escaped his lips unconsciously.

She heard and understood.

Although a paradise to her, to him it was only a prison.

"It is with him as with the great black eagle that they keep in the bridge-tower, in a hole in the dark, with wings cut close and a stone tied to each foot," she thought, as she went on her way noise-

lessly down with the ebb tide on the river. And she sorrowed exceedingly for his sake.

She knew nothing of all that he remembered in the years of his past—of all that he had lost, whilst yet young, as men should only lose their joys in the years of their old age; she knew nothing of the cities and the habits of the world—nothing of the world's pleasures and the world's triumphs.

To her it had always seemed strange that he wanted any other life than this which he possessed.

To her, the freedom, the strength, the simplicity of it, seemed noble, and all that the heart of a man could desire from fate.

Going forth at sunrise to his daily labour on the broad golden sheet of the waters, down to the sight and the sound and the smell of the sea, and returning at sunset to wander at will through the woods and the pastures in the soft evening shadows; free to watch and pourtray with the turn of his wrist the curl of each flower, the wonder of every cloud, the smile in any woman's eyes, the gleam of any moonbeam through the leaves; or to lie still on the grass, or the sand by the shore, and see the armies of the mists sweep by over his head, and hearken to the throb of the nightingale's voice through the darkness, and gather the coolness of the dews in

the hollow of his hand, and let the night go by in dreams of worlds beyond the stars;—such a life as this seemed to her beyond any other beautiful.

A life in the air, on the tide, in the light, in the wind, in the sound of salt waves, in the smell of wild thyme, with no roof to come between him and the sky, with no need to cramp body and mind in the cage of a street—a life spent in the dreaming of dreams, and full of vision and thought as the summer was full of its blossom and fruits,—it seemed to her the life that must needs be best for a man, since the life that was freest, simplest, and highest.

She knew nothing of the lust of ambition, of the desire of fame, of the ceaseless unrest of the mind which craves the world's honour, and is doomed to the world's neglect; of the continual fire which burns in the hands which stretch themselves in conscious strength to seize a sceptre, and remain empty, only struck in the palm by the buffets of fools.

Of these she knew nothing.

She had no conception of them—of the weakness and the force that twine one in another in such a temper as his. She was at once above them and beneath them. She could not comprehend that

he who could so bitterly disdain the flesh-pots and the wine-skins of the common crowd, yet could stoop to care for that crowd's Hosannas.

But yet this definite longing which she overheard in the words that escaped him she could not mistake; it was a longing plain to her, one that moved all the dullest and most brutal souls around her.

All her years through she had seen the greed of gold, or the want of it, the twin rulers of the only little dominion that she knew. Money, in her estimate of it, meant only some little sum of copper pieces, such as could buy a hank of flax, a load of sweet chestnuts, a stack of wood, a swarm of bees, a sack of autumn fruits.

What in cities would have been penury, was deemed illimitable riches in the homesteads and cabins which had been her only world.

"A little gold!—a little gold!" she pondered ceaselessly, as she went on down the current.

She knew that he only craved it, not to purchase any pleasure for his appetites or for his vanities, but only as the lever whereby he would be enabled to lift off him that iron weight of adverse circumstance which held him down in darkness as the stones held the caged eagle.

“A little gold!” she said to herself again and again as the boat drifted on to the town, with the scent of the mulberries, and the herbs, and the baskets of roses, which were its cargo for the market, fragrant on the air.

“A little gold!”

It seemed so slight a thing, and the more cruel because so slight, to stand thus between him and that noonday splendour of fame which he sought to win, in his obscurity and indigence, as the blinded eagle in his den still turned his aching eyes by instinct to the sun.

Her heart was weary for him as she went.

“What use for the gods to have given him back life,” she thought, “if they must give him thus with it the incurable fever of an endless desire?”

It was a gift as poisoned, a granted prayer as vain, as the immortality which they had given to Tithonus.

“A little money,” he had said: it seemed a thing almost within her grasp.

Had she been again willing to steal from Flamma, she could have taken it as soon as the worth of the load which she carried should have been paid to her; but by a theft she would not

serve Arslàn now. No gifts would she give him but what should be pure and worthy of his touch.

She pondered and pondered, cleaving the waters with regular measure, and gliding under the old stone arches of the bridge into the town.

When she brought the boat back up the stream at noonday, her face had cleared; her mouth smiled; she rowed on swiftly, with a light sweet and glad in her eyes.

A thought had come to her.

In the market-place that day she had heard two women talk together, under the shade of their great red umbrellas, over their heaps of garden produce.

“So thou hast bought the brindled calf after all. Thou art in luck.”

“Aye, in luck indeed, for the boy to rout up the old pear-tree and find those queer coins beneath it. The tree had stood there all my father’s and grandfather’s time, and longer too, for aught I know, and no one ever dreamed there was any treasure at the root; but he took a fancy to dig up the tree; he said it looked like a ghost, with its old grey arms, and he wanted to plant a young cherry.”

“There must have been a mass of coin?”

“No,—only a few little shabby, bent pieces. But

the lad took them up to the Prince Sartorian ; and he is always crazed about the like ; and he sent us for them quite a roll of gold, and said that the coins found were, beyond a doubt, of the Julian time—whatever he might mean by that.”

“ Sartorian will buy any rubbish of that sort. For my part, I think if one buried a brass button only long enough, he would give one a bank-note for it.”

“ They say there are marble creatures of his that cost more than would dower a thousand brides, or pension a thousand soldiers. I do not know about that. My boy did not get far in the palace ; but he said that the hall he waited in was graven with gold and precious stones. One picture he saw in it was placed on a golden altar, as if it were a god. To worship old coins, and rags of canvas, and idols of stone like that,—how vile it is ! while we are glad to get a nettle-salad off the edge of the road.”

“ But the coins gave thee the brindled calf.”

“ That was no goodness to us. Sartorian has a craze for such follies.”

Folle-Farine had listened, and, standing by them, for once spoke.

“ Who is Sartorian ? Will you tell me ? ”

The women were from a far-distant village, and

had not the infinite horror of her felt by those who lived in the near neighbourhood of the mill of Yprés.

“He is a great noble,” they answered her, eyeing her with suspicion.

“And where is his dwelling?”

“Near Rioz. What do the like of you want with the like of the Prince?”

She gave them thanks for their answers, and turned away in silence with a glow at her heart.

“What is that wicked one thinking of now, that she asks for such as the Prince Sartorian?” said the women, crossing themselves, repentant that they had so far forgotten themselves as to hold any syllable of converse with the devil’s daughter.

An old man plucking birds near at hand chuckled low in his throat:—

“Maybe she knows that Sartorian will give yet more gold for new faces than for old coins; and—how handsome she is, the black-browed witch!”

She had passed away through the crowds of the market, and did not hear.

“I go to Rioz myself in two days’ time with the mules,” she thought; and her heart rose, her glance lightened, she moved through the people with a step so elastic, and a face so radiant from

the flush of a new hope, that they fell away from her with an emotion which for once was not wholly hatred.

That night, when the mill-house was quiet, and the moonbeams fell through all its small dim windows and chequered all its wooden floors, she rose from the loft where she slept, and stole noiselessly down the steep stairway to the chamber where the servant Pitchou slept.

It was a little dark chamber, with jutting beams and a casement that was never unclosed. On a nail hung the blue woollen skirt and the linen cap of the woman's working-dress. In a corner was a little image of a saint and a string of leaden beads.

On a flock pallet the old wrinkled creature slept, tired out with the labour of a long day amongst the cabbage-beds and rows of lettuces, muttering as she slept of the little daily peculations that were the sweet sins of her life and of her master's.

She cared for her soul—cared very much, and tried to save it; but cheating was dear to her, and cruelty was natural: she tricked the fatherless child in his measure of milk for the tenth of a sou, and wrung the throat of the bullfinch as it sang, lest he should peck the tenth of a cherry.

Folle-Farine went close to the straw-bed and laid her hand on the sleeper.

“Wake! I want a word with you.”

Pitchou started, struggled, glared with wide-open, blinded eyes, and gasped in horrible fear.

Folle-Farine put the other hand on her mouth.

“Listen! The night I was brought here you stole the sequins off my head. Give them back to me now, or I will kill you where you lie.”

The grip of her left hand on the woman’s throat, and the gleam of her knife in the right, were enough, as she had counted they would be.

Old Pitchou struggled, lied, stammered, writhed, strove to scream, and swore her innocence of this theft which had waited eleven years to rise against her to Mary and her angels; but in the end she surrendered, and tottered on her shuddering limbs, and crept beneath her bed, and with terror and misery brought forth from her secret hole in the rafters of the floor the little chain of shaking sequins.

It had been of no use to her: she had always thought it of inestimable value, and could never bring herself to part from it, visiting it night and day, and being perpetually tormented with the dread lest her master should discover and claim it.

Folle-Farine seized it from her silently, and laughed—a quiet cold laugh—at the threats and imprecations of the woman who had robbed her in her infancy.

“How can you complain of me, without telling also of your own old sin?” she said, with contempt, as she quitted the chamber. “Shriek away as you choose: the chain is mine, not yours. I was weak when you stole it; I am strong enough now. You had best not meddle, or you will have the worst of the reckoning.”

And she shut the door on the old woman’s screams and left her, knowing well that Pitchou would not dare to summon her master.

It was just daybreak. All the world was still dark.

She slipped the sequins in her bosom, and went back to her own bed of hay in the loft.

There was no sound in the darkness but the faint piping of song birds that felt the coming of day long ere the grosser senses of humanity could have seen a glimmer of light on the black edge of the eastern clouds.

She sat on her couch with the sequins in her hand, and gazed upon them. They were very precious to her. She had never forgotten or ceased

to desire them, though to possess herself of them by force had never occurred to her until that night. Their theft had been a wrong which she had never pardoned, yet she had never avenged it until now.

As she held them in her hand for the first time in eleven years, a strong emotion came over her.

The time when she had worn them came out suddenly in sharp relief from the haze of her imperfect memories. All the old forest-life for a moment revived for her.

The mists of the mountains, the smell of the chestnut-woods, the curl of the white smoke amongst the leaves, the sweet wild strains of the music, the mad grace of the old Moorish dances, the tramp through the hill-passes, the leap and splash of the tumbling waters,—all arose to her for one moment from the oblivion in which years of toil and exile had buried them.

The tears started to her eyes; she kissed the little glittering coins, she thought of Phratos.

She had never known his fate.

The gipsy who had been found dead in the fields had been forgotten by the people before the same snows which had covered his body had melted at the first glimmer of the wintry sun.

Flamma could have told her; but he had never

spoken one word in all her life to her, except in curt reprimand or in cruel irony. All the old memories had died out; and no wanderers of her father's race had ever come into the peaceful and pastoral district of the northern seaboard, where they could have gained no footing, and could have made no plunder.

The sight of the little band of coins, which had danced so often amongst her curls under the moonlit leaves in the Liébana to the leaping and tuneful measures of the viol, moved her to a wistful longing for the smile and the voice of Phratos.

“I would never part with them for myself,” she thought; “I would die of hunger first—were it only myself.”

And still she was resolved to part with them; to sell her single little treasure—the sole gift of the only creature who had ever loved her, even in the very first hour that she had recovered it.

The sequins were worth no more than any baby's woven crown of faded daisies; but to her, as to the old peasant, they seemed, by their golden glitter, a source of wealth incalculable.

At twilight that day, as she stood by Arslàn, she spoke to him, timidly.

“I go to Rioz with the two mules, at daybreak

to-morrow, with flour for Flamma. It is a town, larger than the one yonder. Is there anything I might do there—for you ? ”

“ Do ? What should you do ? ” he answered her, with inattention and almost impatience ; for his heart was sore with the terrible weariness of inaction.

She looked at him very wistfully, and her mouth parted a little as though to speak ; but his repulse chilled the words that rose to her lips.

She dared not say her thoughts to him, lest she should displease him.

“ If it come to nought he had best not know, perhaps,” she said to herself.

So she kept silence.





CHAPTER II.

ON the morrow, before the sun was up, she set out on her way, with the two mules, to Rioz. It was a town distant some three leagues, lying to the southward.

Both the mules were heavily laden with as many sacks as they could carry: she could ride on neither; she walked between them with a bridle held in either hand.

The road was not a familiar one to her; she had only gone thither some twice or thrice, and she did not find the way long, being full of her own meditations and hopes, and taking pleasure in the gleam of new waters and the sight of fresh fields, and the green simple loveliness of a pastoral country in late summer.

She met few people; a market-woman or two on

their asses, a walking pedlar, a shepherd, or a swineherd—these were all.

The day was young, and none but the country-people were astir. The quiet roads were dim with mists; and the tinkle of a sheep's bell was the only sound in the silence.

But as the morning advanced the mists lifted, the sun grew powerful; the roads were straight and without shadow; the mules stumbled, footsore; she herself grew tired and fevered.

It was midday when she entered Rioz; a town standing in a dell, surrounded with apple orchards and fields of corn and colza, with a quaint old square tower of the thirteenth century rising amongst its roofs, and round about it old moss-green ramparts whereon the bramble and the gorse grew wild.

She led her fatigued and thirsty beasts through the nearest gateway, where a soldier sat smoking, and a girl in a blue petticoat and a scarlet bodice talked to him, resting her hands on her hips, and her brass pails on the ground.

She left the sacks of flour at their destination, which was a great bakehouse in the centre of the town; stalled the mules herself in a shed adjoining the little crazy wine-shop where Flamma had bidden

her bait them, and with her own hands unharnessed, watered, and foddered them.

The wine-shop had for sign a white pigeon ; it was tumble-down, dusky, half covered with vines that grew loose and entwined each other at their own fancy ; it had a little court in which grew a great walnut-tree ; there was a bench under the tree ; and the shelter of its boughs was cool and very welcome in the full noon heat. The old woman who kept the place, wrinkled, shrivelled, and cheery, bade her rest there, and she would bring her food and drink.

But Folle-Farine, with one wistful glance at the shadowing branches, refused, and asked only the way to the house of the Prince Sartorian.

The woman of the tavern looked at her sharply, and said, as the market-women had said, "What does the like of you want with the Prince?"

"I want to know the way to it. If you do not tell it, another will," she answered, as she moved out of the little court-yard.

The old woman called after her that it was out by the west gate, over the hill through the fields for more than two leagues : if she followed the wind of the water westward, she could not go amiss.

"What is that baggage wanting to do with Sar-

torian?" she muttered, watching the form of the girl as it passed up the steep sunshiny street.

"Some evil, no doubt," answered her assistant, a stalwart wench, who was skinning a rabbit in the yard. "You know, she sells bags of wind to founder the ships, they say, and the wicked herb, *bon plaisir*, and the philtres that drive men mad. She is as bad as a *cagote*."

Her old mistress, going within to toss a fritter for one of the mendicant friars, chuckled grimly to herself.

"No one would ask the road *there* for any good; that is sure. No doubt she has heard that Sartorian is a choice judge of colour and shape in all the Arts!"

Folle-Farine went out by the gate, and along the water westward.

In a little satchel she carried some half-score of oil-sketches that Arslàn had given her, rich, graceful, shadowy things—girls' faces, coils of foliage, river rushes in the moonlight, a purple passion-flower blooming on a grey ruin; a child, golden-headed and bare limbed, wading in brown waters;—things that had caught his sight and fancy, and had been transcribed, and then tossed aside, with the lavish carelessness of genius.

She asked one or two peasants, whom she met, her way ; they stared, and grumbled, and pointed to some distant towers rising out of wooded slopes,—those they said were the towers of the dwelling of Sartorian.

One hen-huckster, leading his ass to market with a load of live poultry, looked over his shoulder after her, and muttered with a grin to his wife :

“ There goes a handsome piece of porcelain for the old man to lock in his velvet-lined cupboards.”

And the wife laughed in answer :

“ Ay ; she will look well, gilded as Sartorian always gilds what he buys.”

The words came to the ear of Folle-Farine : she wondered what they could mean ; but she would not turn back to ask.

Her feet were weary, like her mules' ; the sun scorched her ; she felt feeble, and longed to lie down and sleep ; but she toiled on up the sharp ascent that rose in cliffs of limestone above the valley where the river ran.

At last she came to gates that were like those of the cathedral, all brazen, blazoned, and full of scrolls and shields. She pushed one open—there was no one there to say her nay, and boldly entered the domain which they guarded.

At first it seemed to be only like the woods at home ; the trees were green, the grass was long, the birds sang, the rabbits darted. But by-and-by she went farther ; she grew bewildered ; she was in a world strange to her.

Trees she had never seen rose like the pillars of temples ; gorgeous flowers, she had never dreamed of, played in the sun ; vast columns of water sprang aloft from the mouths of golden dragons or the silver breasts of dolphins ; nude women, wondrous and white and still, stood here and there amidst the leafy darkness. She paused amongst it all, dazzled, and thinking that she dreamed.

She had never seen any gardens, save the gardens of the poor.

A magnolia-tree was above her ; she stooped her face to one of its great fragrant creamy cups and kissed it softly. A statue of Clytie was beside her ; she looked timidly up at the musing face, and touched it, wondering why it was so very cold, and would not move or smile.

A fountain flung up its spray beside her ; she leaned and caught it, thinking it so much silver, and gazed at it in sorrowful wonder as it changed to water in her grasp.

She walked on like one enchanted, silently, and thinking that she had strayed into some sorcerer's kingdom: she was not afraid, but glad. She walked on for a long while, always amongst these mazes of leaves, these splendours of blossom, these cloud-reaching waters, these marble forms so motionless and thoughtful.

At last she came on the edge of a great pool, fringed with the bullrush and the lotus, and the white pampas-grass, and the flame-like flowering reed, of the East and of the West. All around, the pool was sheltered with dark woods of cedar and thickets of the sea-pine. Beyond them stood afar off a great pile that seemed to her to blaze like gold and silver in the sun. She approached it through a maze of roses, and ascended a flight of marble steps on to a terrace. A doorway was open near. She entered it.

She was intent on the object of her errand, and she had no touch of fear in her whole temper.

Hall after hall, room after room, opened to her amazed vision; an endless spectacle of marvellous colour stretched before her eyes: the wonders that are gathered together by the world's luxury were for the first time in her sight; she saw for the first time in her life how the rich lived.

She moved forward, curious, astonished, bewildered, but nothing daunted.

On the velvet of the floors her steps trod as firmly and as freely as on the moss of the orchard at Yprés. Her eyes glanced as gravely and as fearlessly over the frescoed walls, the gilded woods, the jewelled cups, the brodered hangings, as over the misty pastures where the sheep were folded.

It was not in the daughter of Taric to be daunted by the dazzle of mere wealth. She walked through the splendid and lonely rooms wondering, indeed, and eager to see more; but there was no spell here such as the gardens had flung over her. To the creature free born in the Liébana no life beneath a roof could seem beautiful.

She met no one.

At the end of the fourth chamber, which she traversed, she paused before a great picture in a heavy golden frame: it was the seizure of Persephone. She knew the story, for Arslàn had told her of it.

She saw for the first time how the pictures that men called great were installed in princely splendour: this was the fate which he wanted for his own.

A little lamp, burning perfume with a silvery

smoke, stood before it: she recalled the words of the woman in the market-place; in her ignorance, she thought the picture was worshipped as a divinity; as the people worshipped the great picture of the Virgin that they burned incense before in the cathedral.

She looked, with something of gloomy contempt in her eyes, at the painting which was mantled in massive gold, with purple draperies opening to display it; for it was the chief masterpiece upon those walls.

“And he cares for *that*!” she thought, with a sigh half of wonder, half of sorrow.

She did not reason on it, but it seemed to her that his works were greater hanging on their bare walls where the spiders wove.

“Who is ‘he’?” a voice asked behind her.

She turned and saw a small and feeble man, with keen and humorous eyes, and an elfin face, delicate in its form, malicious in its meaning.

She stood silent, regarding him; herself a strange figure in that lordly place, with her brown limbs, her bare head and feet, her linen tunic, her red knotted girdle.

“Who are you?” she asked him curtly, in counter-question.

The little old man laughed.

“I have the honour to be your host.”

A disappointed astonishment clouded her face.

“You! are you Sartorian?” she muttered—
“the Sartorian whom they call a prince?”

“Even I,” he said with a smile. “I regret that I please you no more. May I ask to what I am indebted for your presence? You seem a fastidious critic.”

He spoke with good-humoured irony, taking snuff whilst he looked at the lustrous beauty of this barefooted gipsy, as he thought her, whom he had found thus astray in his magnificent chambers.

She amused him; finding her silent, he sought to make her speak.

“How did you come in hither? You care for pictures, perhaps, since you seem to feed on them like some wood-pigeon on a sheaf of corn?”

“I know of finer than yours,” she answered him coldly, chilled by the amused and malicious ridicule of his tone into a sullen repose. “I did not come to see anything you have. I came to sell you these: they say in Yprés that you care for such bits of coin.”

She drew out of her bosom her string of sequins, and tendered them to him.

He took them, seeing at a glance that they were of no sort of value; such things as he could buy for a few coins in any bazaar of Africa or Asia. But he did not say so.

He looked at her keenly, as he asked :

“ Whose were these ? ”

She looked in return at him with haughty defiance.

“ They are mine. If you want such things, as they say you do, take them and give me their value—that is all.”

“ Do you come here to sell them ? ”

“ Yes. I came three leagues to-day. I heard a woman from near Rioz say that you liked such things. Take them, or leave them.”

“ Who gave them to you ? ”

“ Phratos.”

Her voice lingered sadly over the word. She still loved the memory of Phratos.

“ And who may Phratos be ? ”

Her eyes flashed fire at the cross-questioning.

“ That is none of your business. If you think that I stole them, say so. If you want them, buy them. One or the other.”

The old man watched her amusedly.

“ You can be very fierce,” he said to her. “ Be

gentle a little, and tell me whence you came, and what story you have."

But she would not.

"I have not come here to speak of myself," she said obstinately. "Will you take the coins, or leave them?"

"I will take them," he said; and he went to a cabinet in another room and brought out with him several shining gold pieces.

She fastened her eager eyes on them thirstily.

"Here is payment," he said to her, holding them to her.

Her eyes fastened on the money entranced; she touched it with a light, half-fearful touch, and then drew back and gazed at it amazed.

"All that—all that?" she muttered. "Is it their worth? Are you sure?"

"Quite sure," he said with a smile. He offered her in them some thirty times their value.

She paused a moment, incredulous of her own good fortune, then darted on them as a swallow at a gnat, and took them and put them to her lips, and laughed a sweet glad laugh of triumph, and slid them in her bosom.

"I am grateful," she said simply; but the radiance in her eyes, the laughter on her mouth,

the quivering excitement in all her face and form, said the same thing for her far better than her words.

The old man watched her narrowly.

“They are not for yourself?” he asked.

“That is my affair,” she answered him, all her pride rising in arms. “What concerned you was their value.”

He smiled and bent his head.

“Fairly rebuked. But say is this all you came for? Wherever you came from, is this all that brought you here?”

She looked awhile in his eyes steadily, then she brought the sketches from their hiding-place. She placed them before him.

“Look at those.”

He took them to the light and scanned them slowly and critically; he knew all the mysteries and intricacies of art, and he recognised in these slight things the hand and the colour of a master. He did not say so, but held them for some time in silence.

“These also are for sale?” he asked, at length.

She had drawn near him, her face flushed with intense expectation, her longing eyes dilated, her scarlet lips quivering with eagerness. That he was a

stranger and a noble was nothing to her : she knew he had wealth ; she saw he had perception.

“ See here ! ” she said, swiftly, the music of her voice rising and falling in breathless, eloquent intonation. “ Those things are to the great works of his hand as a broken leaf beside your gardens yonder. He touches a thing and it is beauty. He takes a reed, a stone, a breadth of sand, a woman’s face, and under his hand it grows glorious and gracious. He dreams things that are strange and sublime ; he has talked with the gods, and he has seen the worlds beyond the sun. All the day he works for his bread, and in the grey night he wanders where none can follow him ; and he brings back marvels and mysteries, and beautiful, terrible stories that are like the sound of the sea. Yet he is poor, and no man sees the things of his hand ; and he is sick of his life, because the days go by and bring no message to him, and men will have nothing of him ; and he has hunger of body and hunger of mind. For me, if I could do what he does, I would not care though no man ever looked on it. But to him it is bitter that it is only seen by the newt, and the beetle, and the night-hawk. It wears his soul away, because he is denied of men. ‘ If I had gold, if I

had gold !' he says always, when he thinks that none can hear him."

Her voice trembled and was still for a second ; she struggled with herself and kept it clear and strong.

The old man never interrupted her.

" He must not know : he would kill himself if he knew ; he would sooner die than tell any man. But, look you, you drape your pictures here with gold and with purple, you place them high in the light ; you make idols of them, and burn your incense before them. That is what he wants for his : they are the life of his life. If they could be honoured, he would not care, though you should slay him to-morrow. Go to him, and make you idols of his : they are worthier gods than yours. And what his heart is sick for is to have them seen by men. Were I he, I would not care ; but he cares, so that he perishes."

She shivered as she spoke ; in her earnestness and eagerness, she laid her hand on the stranger arm, and held it there ; she prayed, with more passion than she would have cast into any prayer to save her own life.

" Where is he ; and what do you call him ? " the old man asked her quietly.

He understood the meaning that ran beneath the unconscious extravagance of her fanciful and impassioned language.

“ He is called Arslàn ; he lives in the granary-tower, by the river, between the town and Yprés. He comes from the north, far away—very, very far, where the seas are all ice and the sun shines at midnight. Will you make the things that he does to be known to the people ? You have gold ; and gold, he says, is the compeller of men.”

“ Arslàn ? ” he echoed.

The name was not utterly unknown to him ; he had seen works signed with it at Paris and at Rome—strange things of a singular power, of an union of cynicism and idealism, which was too sensual for one half the world, and too pure for the other half.

“ Arslàn ?—I think I remember. I will see what I can do.”

“ You will say nothing to him of me.”

“ I could not say much. Who are you ? Whence do you come ? ”

“ I live at the water-mill of Yprés. They say that Reine Flamma was my mother. I do not know : it does not matter.”

“ What is your name ? ”

“Folle-Farine. They called me after the mill-dust.”

“A strange namesake.”

“What does it matter? Any name is only a little puff of breath—less than the dust, anyhow.”

“Is it? I see, you are a Communist.”

“What?”

“A Communist—a Socialist. You know what that is. You would like to level my house to the ashes, I fancy, by the look on your face.”

“No,” she said, simply, with a taint of scorn, “I do not care to do that. If I had cared to burn anything it would have been the Flandrin’s village. It is odd that you should live in a palace and he should want for bread; but then he can create things, and you can only buy them. So it is even, perhaps.”

The old man smiled, amused.

“You are no respecter of persons, that is certain. Come in another chamber and take some wine, and break your fast. There will be many things here that you never saw or tasted.”

She shook her head.

“The thought is good of you,” she said, more gently than she had before spoken. “But I

never took a crust out of charity, and I will not begin."

"Charity! Do you call an invitation a charity?"

"When the rich ask the poor—yes."

Sartorian looked in her eyes with a smile.

"But when a man, old and ugly, asks a woman that is young and beautiful, on which side lies the charity then?"

"I do not favour fine phrases," she answered curtly, returning his look with a steady indifference.

"You are hard to please in anything, it would seem. Well, come hither, a moment at least."

She hesitated a moment; then thinking to herself that to refuse would seem like fear, she followed him through several chambers into one where his own mid-day breakfast was set forth.

She moved through all the magnificence of the place with fearless steps, and meditative glances, and a grave measured easy grace, as tranquil and as unimpressed as though she walked through the tall ranks of the seeding grasses on a meadow slope.

It was all full of the colour, the brilliancy, the choice adornment, the unnumbered treasures, and the familiar luxuries of a great noble's residence; but such things as these had no awe for her.

The mere splendours of wealth, the mere accu-

mulations of luxury, could not impress her for an instant; she passed through them indifferent and undaunted, thinking to herself, "However they may gild their roofs, the roofs shut out the sky no less."

Only, as she passed by some dream of a great poet cast in the visible shape of sculpture or of painting, did her glance grow reverent and humid; only when she recognised amidst the marble forms, or the pictured stories, some one of those dear gods in whom she had a faith as pure and true as ever stirred in the heart of an Ionian child, did she falter and pause a little to gaze there with a tender homage in her eyes.

The old man watched her with a musing, studious glance from time to time.

"Let me tempt you," he said to her when they reached the breakfast-chamber. "Sit down with me and eat and drink. No? Taste these sweetmeats at the least. To refuse to break bread with me is churlish."

"I never owed any man a crust, and I will not begin now," she answered obstinately, indifferent to the blaze of gold and silver before her, to the rare fruits and flowers, to the wines in their quaint flagons, to the numerous attendants who waited motionless around her.

She was sharply hungered, and her throat was parched with the heat and the dust, and the sweet unwonted odours of the wines and the fruits assailed all her senses ; but he besought her in vain.

She poured herself out some water into a goblet of ruby glass, rimmed with a band of pearls, and drank it, and set down the cup as indifferently as though she had drunk from the old wooden bowl chained amongst the ivy to the well in the mill-yard.

“ Your denial is very churlish,” he said, after many a honeyed entreaty, which had met with no other answer from her. “ How shall you bind me to keep bond with you, and rescue your Northern Regner from his cave of snakes, unless you break bread with me, and so compel my faith ?”

She looked at him from under the dusky cloud of her hair, with the golden threads gleaming on it like sun-rays through darkness.

“ A word that needs compelling,” she answered him curtly, “ is broken by the heart before the lips give it. It is to plant a tree without a root, to put faith in a man that needs a bond.”

He watched her with keen humorous eyes of amusement.

“ Where have you got all your wisdom ?” he asked.

“It is not wisdom ; it is truth.”

“And truth is not wisdom ? You would seem to know the world well.”

She laughed a little short laugh, whilst her face clouded.

“I know it not at all. But I will tell you what I have seen.”

“And that is——?”

“I have seen a great toadstool spring up all in one night, after rain, so big, and so white, and so smooth, and so round,—and I knew its birth was so quick, and its growth was so strong, because it was a false thing that would poison all who should eat of it.”

“Well?”

“Well—when men speak over-quick and over-fair, what is that but the toadstool that springs from their breath?”

“Who taught you so much suspicion?”

Her face darkened in anger.

“Suspicion ? That is a thing that steals in the dark and is afraid. I am afraid of nothing.”

“So it would seem.”

He mused a moment whether he should offer her back her sequins as a gift ; he thought not. He divined aright that she had only sold them because

she had innocently believed in the fulness of their value. He tried to tempt her otherwise.

She was young; she had a beautiful face, and a form like an Atalanta. She wore a scarlet sash girt to her loins, and seemed to care for colour and for grace. There was about her a dauntless and imperious freedom. She could not be indifferent to all those powers which she besought with such passion for another.

He had various treasures shown to her,—treasures of jewels, of gold and silver, of fine workmanship, of woven stuffs delicate and gorgeous as the wing of a butterfly.

She looked at them tranquilly, as though her eyes had rested on such things all her days.

“They are beautiful, no doubt,” she said simply. “But I marvel that you—being a man—care for such things as these.”

“Nay; I care to give them to beautiful women, when such come to me,—as one has come to-day. Do me one trifling grace; choose some one thing at least out of these to keep in remembrance of me.”

Her eyes burned in anger.

“If I think your bread would soil my lips, is it likely I should think to touch your treasure with my hands and have them still clean?”

"You are very perverse," he said, relinquishing his efforts with regret.

He knew how to wait for a netted fruit to ripen under the rays of temptation: gold was a forcing-heat—slow, but sure.

She watched him with musing eyes that had a gleam of scorn in them, and yet a certain apprehension.

"Are you the Red Mouse?" she said suddenly.

He looked at her surprised, and for the moment perplexed; then he laughed—his little low cynical laugh.

"What makes you think that?"

"I do not know. You look like it—that is all. He has made one sketch of me as I shall be when I am dead; and the Red Mouse sits on my chest, and it is glad. You see that, by its glance. I never asked him what he meant by it. Some evil, I think; and you look like it. You have the same triumph in your eye."

He laughed again, not displeased, as she had thought that he would be.

"He has painted you so? I must see that. But believe me, Folle-Farine, I shall wish for my triumph before your beauty is dead—if I am indeed the Red Mouse."

She shrunk a little with an unconscious and uncontrollable gesture of aversion.

"I must go," she said abruptly. "The mules wait. Remember him, and I will remember you."

He smiled.

"Wait, have you thought what a golden key for him will do for you when it unlocks your eagle's cage and unbinds his wings?"

"What?"

She did not understand; when she had come on this eager errand, no memory of her own fate had retarded or hastened her footsteps.

"Well, you look to take the same flight to the same heights, I suppose?"

"I?"

"Yes, you. You must know that you are beautiful. You must know so much?"

A proud light laughed like sunshine over all her face.

"Ah, yes!" she said, with a little low, glad breath, and the blaze of a superb triumph in her eyes. "He has painted me in a thousand ways. I shall live as the rose lives, on his canvas—a thing of a day that he can make immortal!"

The keen elfin eyes of the old man sparkled with

a malign mirth; he had found what he wanted—as he thought.

“And so, if this dust of oblivion blots out his canvas for ever from the world’s sight, your beauty will be blotted with it? I see. Well, I can understand how eager you are to have your eagle fly free. The fame of the Fornarina stands only second to the fame of Cleopatra.”

“Fornarina? What is that?”

“Fornarina? One who, like you, gave the day’s life of a rose, and who got eternal life for it,—as you think to do.”

She started a little, and a tremulous pain passed over the dauntless brilliance of her face and stole its colour for awhile.

“I?” she murmured. “Ah, what does it matter for me? If there be just a little place—anywhere—wherever my life can live with his on the canvas, so that men say once now and then, in all the centuries, to each other, ‘See, it is true—he thought her worthy of *that*, though she was less than a grain of dust under the hollow of his foot,’ it will be enough for me—more than enough.”

The old man was silent; watching her, the mockery had faded from his eyes; they were surprised and contemplative. She stood with her head drooped,

with her face pale, an infinite yearning and resignation stole into the place of the exultant triumph which had blazed there like the light of morning a moment earlier.

She had lost all remembrance of time and place; the words died softly, as in a sigh of love, upon her lips.

He waited awhile; then he spoke.

“ But, if you were sure that even thus much would be denied to you; if you were sure that, in casting your eagle loose on the wind, you would lose him for ever in the heights of a heaven you would never enter yourself; if you were sure that he would never give you one thought, one wish, one memory, but leave every trace of your beauty to perish as fast as the damp could rot or the worm could gnaw it; if you were sure that his immortality would be your annihilation, say, would you still bid me turn a gold key in the lock of his cage, and release him?”

She roused herself slowly from her reverie, and gazed at him with a smile he could not fathom; it was so far away from him, so full of memory, so pitiful of his doubt.

She was thinking of the night when she had found a man dying, and had bought his life back for him, with her own, from the gods.

For the past was sacred to her, and the old wild faith to her was still a truth.

But of it her lips never spoke.

“What is that to you?” she said, briefly. “If you turn the key, you will see. It was not of myself that I came here to speak. Give him liberty, and I will give you gratitude. Farewell.”

Before he had perceived what she was about to do, she had left his side, and had vanished through one of the doors which stood open, on to the gardens without.

He sent his people to search for her on the terraces and lawns, but vainly; she was fleetier than they, and had gone through the green glades in the sunlight as fast as a doe flies down the glades of her native forest.

The old man sat silent.





CHAPTER III.



WHEN she had outrun her strength for the moment, and was forced to slacken her speed, she paused to take breath on the edge of the wooded lands. She looked neither to right nor left; on her backward flight the waters had no song, the marble forms no charm, the wonder-flowers no magic for her as she went; she had no ear for the melodies of the birds, no sight for the paradise of the rose-hung ways; she had only one thought left—the gold that she had gained.

The cruelty of his words had stabbed her with each of their slow keen words as with a knife; the sickness of a mortal terror had touched her for the instant, as she had remembered that it might be her fate to be not even so much as a memory in the life which she had saved from the grave.

But with the first breath of the outer air the feebleness passed. The strength of the passion that possessed her was too pure to leave her long a prey to any thought of her own fate.

She smiled again as she looked up through the leaves at the noon-day sun.

“What will it matter how or when the gods take my life, so only they keep their faith and give me his?” she thought.

And her step was firm and free, and her glance cloudless, and her heart content, as she went on her homeward path through the heat of the day.

She was so young, she was so ignorant, she was still so astray in the human world about her, that she thought she held a talisman in those nine gold pieces.

“A little gold,” he had said; and here she had it—honest, clean, worthy of his touch and usage.

Her heart leaped to the glad and bounding music of early youth, youth which does not reason, which only believes, and which sees the golden haze of its own faiths, and thinks them the promise of the future, as young children see the golden haze of their own hair and think it the shade of angels’ wings above their heads.

When she at length reached the mill-house the

sun had sunk ; she had been sixteen hours on foot, taking nothing all the while but a roll of rye bread that she had carried in her pouch, and a few water-cresses that she had gathered in a little brook when the mules had paused to drink there.

Yet when she had housed the grain, and turned the tired animals into their own nook of meadow to graze and rest for the night, she entered the house neither for repose nor food, but flew off again through the dusk of the falling night.

She had no remembrance of hunger, nor thirst, nor fatigue ; she had only a buoyant sense of an ecstatic joy ; she felt as though she had wings, and clove the air with no more effort than the belated starling which flew by her over the fields.

“ A little gold,” he had said ; and in her bosom, wrapped in a green chestnut leaf, were there not the little, broad, round, glittering pieces which in the world of men seemed to have power to gain all love, all honour, all peace, and all fealty ?

“ Phratos would have wished his gift to go so,” she thought to herself, with a swift, penitent, remorseful memory.

For a moment she paused and took them once more out of their hiding-place, and undid the green leaf that enwrapped them, and kissed them and

laughed, the hot tears falling down her cheeks, where she stood alone in the fields amid the honey-smell of the clover in the grass, and the fruit-fragrance of the orchards all about her in the dimness.

“A little gold!—a little gold!” she murmured, and she laughed aloud in her great joy, and blessed the gods that they had given her to hear the voice of his desire.

“A little gold,” he had said, only; and here she had so much!

No sorcerer, she thought, ever had power wider than this wealth bestowed on her. She did not know; she had no measurement. Flamma’s eyes she had seen glisten over a tithe of such a sum as over the riches of an emperor’s treasury.

She slipped them in her breast again and ran on past the reeds silvering in the rising moon, past the waters quiet on a windless air, past the dark Christ who would not look,—who had never looked, or she had loved him with her earliest love, even as for his pity she loved Thanatos.

Breathless and noiseless she severed the reeds with her swift feet, and lightly as a swallow on the wing passed through the dreary portals into Arslàn’s chamber.

His lamp was lighted.

He stood before the cartoon of the Barabbas, touching it here and there with his charcoal, adding those latest thoughts, those after-graces, with which the artist delights to caress his picture, with a hand as soft and as lingering as the hand with which a mother caresses the yellow sunshine of her first-born's curls.

His face as he stood was very pale, passionless, weary, with a sadness sardonic and full of scorn for himself on his mouth, and in his eyes those dreams which went so far—so far—into worlds whose glories his hand could pourtray for no human sight.

He was thinking, as he worked, of the Barabbas.

“ You must rot,” he thought. “ You will feed the rat and the mouse ; the squirrel will come and gnaw you to line his nest ; and the beetle and the fly will take you for a spawning-bed. You will serve no other end,—since you are mine. And yet I am so great a fool that I love you, and try to bring you closer and closer to the thing I see, and which you are not, and never can be. For what man lives so happy as to see the Canaan of his ideals,—save as Moses saw it from afar off, only to raise his arms to it vainly, and die ? ”

There came a soft shiver of the air, as though it were severed by some eager bird.

She came and stood beside him, a flash like the sunrise on her face, a radiance in her eyes more lustrous than any smile; her body tremulous and breathless from the impatient speed with which her footsteps had been winged; about her all the dew and fragrance of the night.

“Here is the gold!” she cried.

Her voice was eager and broken with its too great haste.

“Gold?”

He turned and looked at her, ignorant of her meaning, astonished at her sudden presence there.

“Here is the gold!” she murmured, her voice rising swift and clear, and full of the music of triumph with which her heart was thrilling. “‘A little gold,’ you said, you remember?—‘only a little.’ And this is much. Take it—take it! Do you not hear?”

“Gold?” he echoed again, shaken from his trance of thought, and comprehending nothing and remembering nothing of the words that he had spoken in his solitude.

“Yes! It is mine,” she said, her voice broken in its tumult of ecstasy—“it is mine—all mine.

It is no charity, no gift to me. The chain was worth it, and I would only take what it was worth. A little gold, you said ; and now you can make the Barabbas live for ever upon canvas, and compel men to say that it is great."

As the impetuous, tremulous words broke from her, she drew the green leaf with the coins in it from her bosom, and thrust it into his hand, eager, exultant, laughing, weeping, all the silence and the control of her nature swept away in the flood of this immeasurable joy possessing her.

The touch of the glittering pieces against his hands stung him to comprehension ; his face flushed over all its pallor ; he thrust it away with a gesture of abhorrence and rejection.

" Money ! " he muttered. " What money ?—yours ? "

" Yes, mine entirely ; mine indeed ! " she answered, with a sweet, glad ring of victory in her rejoicing voice. " It is true, quite true. They were the chains of sequins that Phratos gave me when I used to dance to his music in the mountains ; and I have sold them. ' A little gold,' you said ; ' and the Barabbas can live for ever.' Why do you look so ? It is all mine ; all yours——"

In the last words her voice lost all its proud

exultation, and sank low, with a dull startled wonder in it.

Why did he look so ?

His gesture of refusal she had not noticed. But the language his glance spoke was one plain to her. It terrified her, amazed her, struck her chill and dumb.

In it there were disgust, anger, loathing,—even horror; and yet there was in it also an unwonted softness, which in a woman's eyes would have shown itself by a rush of sudden tears.

“What do you think that I have done?” she murmured under her breath. “The gold is mine—mine honestly. I have not stolen it, nor begged it. I got it as I say. Why will you not take it? Why do you look at me so?”

“I? Your money? God in heaven! what can you think me?”

She grew white to the lips, all the impetuous, radiant tumult of her innocent rapture frozen into terror.

“I have done nothing wrong,” she murmured with a piteous wistfulness and wonder—“nothing wrong, indeed; there is no shame in it. Will you not take it—for *their* sake?”

He turned on her with a severity almost savage.

“It is impossible! Good God! Was I not low enough already? How dared you think a thing so vile of me? Have I ever asked pity of any living soul?”

His voice was choked in his throat; he was wounded to the heart.

He had no thought that he was cruel; he had no intent to terrify or hurt her; but the sting of this last and lowest humiliation was so horrible to all the pride of his manhood, and so bitterly reminded him of his own abject poverty; and with all this there was an emotion in him that he had difficulty to control—being touched by her ignorance and by her gift as few things in his life had ever touched him.

She stood before him trembling, wondering, sorely afraid; all the light had died out of her face; she was very pale, and her eyes dilated strangely.

For some moments there was silence between them.

“You will not take it?” she said at last, in a hushed, fearful voice, like that of one who speaks in the sight of some dead thing which makes all quiet around it.

“Take it!” he echoed. “I could sooner kill a

man out yonder and rob him. Can you not understand? Greater shame could never come to me. You do not know what you would do. There may be beasts that fall as low, no doubt, but they are curs too base for hanging. Have I frightened you? I did not mean to frighten you. You mean well and nobly, no doubt—no doubt. You do not know what you would do. Gifts of gold from man to man are bitter, and sap the strength of the receiver; but from woman to man they are—to the man shameful. Can you not understand?”

Her face burned duskily; she moved with a troubled confused effort to get away from his gaze.

“No,” she said in her shut teeth. “I do not know what you mean. Flamma takes all the gold I make. Why not you, if it be gold that is honest?”

“Flamma is your grandsire—your keeper—your master. He has a right to do as he chooses. He gives you food and shelter, and in return he takes the gains of your labour. But I,—what have I ever given you? I am a stranger to you, and should have no claim on you, if I could be base enough to seek one. I am hideously poor. I make no disguise with you,—you know too well how I live. But can you not see?—if I were mean

enough to take the worth of a crust from you, I should be no more worthy of the very name of man. It is for the man to give to the woman. You see?"

She heard him in silence, her face still dark with the confused pain on it of one who has fallen or been struck upon the head, and half forgets and half remembers.

"I do not see," she muttered. "Whoever has, gives: what does it matter? The folly in me was its littleness: it could not be of use. But it was all I had."

"Little or great,—the riches of empires, or a beggar's dole,—there could be no difference in the infamy to me. Have I seemed to you a creature so vile or weak that you could have a title to put such shame upon me?"

Out of the bitter passion of his soul, words more cruel than he had consciousness of rose to his lips and leaped to speech, and stung her as scorpions sting.

She said nothing; her teeth clenched, her face changed as it had used to do when Flamma had beaten her.

She said nothing, but turned away; and with one twist of her hand she flung the pieces through the open casement into the river that flowed below.

They sank with a little shiver of the severed water.

He caught her wrist a second too late.

“What madness! What have you done? You throw your gold away to the river-swamp for me, when I have not a shred worth a copper-piece to pay you back in their stead! I did not mean to hurt you; it was only the truth,—you could not have shamed me more. You bring on me an indignity that I can neither requite nor revenge. You have no right to load me with debts that I cannot pay—with gifts that I would die sooner than receive. But, then, how should you know?—how should you know? If I wounded you with sharp words, I did wrong.”

There was a softness that was almost tenderness in his voice as he spoke the last phrases in his self-reproach; but her face did not change, her eyes did not lose their startled horror; she put her hand to her throat as though she choked.

“You cannot do wrong—to me,” she muttered, true, even in such a moment, to the absolute adoration which possessed her.

Then, ere he could stay her, she turned, without another word, and fled out from his presence into the dusk of the night.

The rushes in the moonlight sighed where they grew by the water-side above the sands where the gold had sunk.

A thing more precious than gold was dead; and only the reeds mourned for it. A thing of the river as they were, born like them from the dust, from the flood, from the wind and the foam; a thing that a god might desire, a thing that a breeze might break.





CHAPTER IV.

THE day broke tranquilly. There was a rosy light over all the earth. In the cornlands a few belated sheaves stood alone in the reaping ground, while children sought stray ears that might still be left amongst the wild flowers and the stubble. The smell of millions of ripening autumn fruits filled the air from the orchards. The women going to their labour in the fields, gave each other a quiet good day; whilst their infants pulled down the blackberry branches in the lanes or bowled the early apples down the roads. Great clusters of black grapes were already mellowed on the vines that clambered over cabin roof and farmhouse chimney. The chimes of the earliest bells sounded softly

from many a little steeple bosomed in the rolling woods.

An old man going to his work passed by a girl lying asleep in a hollow of the ground, beneath a great tree of elder, black with berries. She was lying with her face turned upward; her arms above her head; her eyelids were wet; her mouth smiled with a dreamy tenderness; her lips murmured a little inaudibly; her bosom heaved with fast uneven palpitating breaths.

It was sunrise.

In the elder thicket little chaffinches were singing, and a missel-thrush gave late in the year a song of the April weather. The east was radiant with the promise of a fair day, in which summer and autumn should be wedded with gorgeous pomp of colour, and joyous chorus of the birds. The old man roughly thrust against her breast the heavy wooden shoe on his right foot.

“Get up!” he muttered, “Is it for the like of you to lie and sleep at day-dawn? Get up, or your breath will poison the grasses that the cattle feed on, and they will die of an elf-shot, surely.”

She raised her head from where it rested on her outstretched arms, and looked him in the eyes and smiled unconsciously; then glanced around and

rose and dragged her steps away, in the passive mechanical obedience begotten by long slavery.

There was a shiver in her limbs ; a hunted terror in her eyes ; she had wandered sleepless all night long.

“ Beast,” muttered the old man, trudging on with a backward glance at her. “ You have been at a witches’ sabbath, I dare be bound. We shall have fine sickness in the styes and byres. I wonder would a silver bullet hurt you, as the fables say ? If I were sure it would, I would not mind having my old silver flagon melted down, though it is the only thing worth a rush in the house.”

She went on through the long wet rank grass, not hearing his threats against her. She drew her steps slowly and lifelessly through the heavy dews ; her head was sunk ; her lips moved audibly, and murmured as she went, “ A little gold ! a little gold ! ”

“ May be some one has shot her this very day-dawn,” thought the peasant, shouldering his axe as he went down into the little wood to cut ash-sticks for the market. “ She looks half dead already ; and they say the devil-begotten never bleed.”

The old man guessed aright. She had received her mortal wound ; though it was one bloodless and

tearless, and for which no moan was made, lest any should blame the slayer.

The sense of some great guilt was on her, as she stole through the rosy warmth of the early morning.

She had thought to take him liberty, honour, strength, and dominion amongst his fellows—and he had told her, that she had dealt him the foulest shame that his life had ever known.

“What right have you to burden me with debt unasked?” he had cried out against her in the bitterness of his soul. And she knew that, unasked, she had laid on him the debt of life.

If ever he should know?——

She had wandered on and on, aimlessly, not knowing what she did all the night through, hearing no other sound but the fierce hard scathing scorn of his reproaches.

He had told her she was in act so criminal, and yet she knew herself in intent so blameless; she felt like those of whom she had heard in the old Hellenic stories, who had been doomed by fate, guiltless themselves, to work some direful guilt, which had to be, out to its bitter end, the innocent yet the accursed instrument of destiny, even as Adrastus upon Atys.

On and on, through the moonlight she had fled,

when she had left the water-tower that night ; down the slope of the fields, through the late blossoms of the poppies, and the feathery haze of the ripened grasses tossed in waves from right to left; the long shadows of the clouds upon the earth, chasing her like the spectre hosts of the Aaskarreya of his Scandinavian skies.

She had dropped at last like a dying thing, broken and breathless on the ground.

There she crouched, and hid her face upon her hands ; the scorch of an intolerable shame burned on it.

She did not know what ailed her ; what consumed her with abhorrence of herself. She longed for the earth to yawn and cover her ; for the lilies asleep in the pool, to unclothe and take her amidst them. Every shiver of a leaf, under a night bird's passage, every motion of the water, as the willow branches swept it, made her start and shiver as though some great guilt was on her soul.

Not a breath of wind was stirring, not a sound disturbed the serenity of the early night ; she heard no voice but the plaintive cry of the cushat. She saw "no snakes but the keen stars," which looked on her cold and luminous, and indifferent to human woes as the eyes of Arslàn.

Yet she was afraid; afraid with a trembling horror of herself; she who had once never known one pulse of fear, and who had smiled in the eyes of death as children in their mother's.

The thrill of a new-born inexplicable cruel, consciousness stole like fire through her. She knew now that she loved him with that strange mystery of human love which had been forever to her until now a thing apart from her, denied to her, half scorned, half yearned for; viewed from afar with derision, yet with desire, as a thing at once beneath her and beyond her.

All the light died; the moon rose; the white lilies shivered in its pallid rays; the night birds went by on the wind. She never stirred; the passionate warmth of her frame changed to a deadly cold; her face was buried in her hands; ever and again she shivered, and glanced round, as the sound of a hare's step, or the rustle of a bough by a squirrel broke the silence.

The calm night-world around her, the silvery seas of reeds, the dusky woods, the moon in its ring of golden vapour, the flickering foliage, the gleam of the glowworm in the dew, all the familiar things amidst which her feet had wandered for twelve summers in the daily measure of those

beaten tracks ; all these seemed suddenly strange to her—mysterious, unreal.

She longed for the day to dawn again, though day was but an hour dead. And yet she felt that at the first break of light she must flee and hide from his and every eye.

She but meant to give him honour ; and he had upbraided her gift as shame.

The bitterness, the cruelty, the passion of his reproaches, stung her with their poison, as, in her vision of the reed, she had seen the barbed tongues of a thousand snakes striking through and through the frail, despised, blossomless slave of the wind.

She had thought that as the god to the reed, so might he to her say hereafter, “ You are the lowliest and least of all the chance-born things of the sands and the air, and yet through you has an immortal music arisen,”—and for the insanity of her thought he had cursed her.

Towards dawn, where she had sunk down in the moss, and in the thickets of elder and thorn—where she had made her bed in her childhood many a summer night, when she had been turned out from the doors of the mill-house ;—there for a little while a fitful exhausted sleep came to her ; the intense exhaustion of bodily fatigue overcoming and drug-

ging to slumber the fever and the wakefulness of the mind. The thrush came out of the thorn, while it was still quite dark, and the morning stars throbbed in the skies, and sang his day-song close about her head.

In her sleep she smiled. For Oneiros was merciful; and she dreamed that she slept folded close in the arms of Arslàn, and in her dreams she felt the kisses of his lips rain fast on hers.

Then the old peasant trudging to his labour in the obscurity of the early day saw her, and struck at her with his foot and woke her roughly, and muttered, "Get thee up: is it such beggars as thee that should be a-bed when the sun breaks?"

She opened her eyes, and smiled on him unconsciously, as she had smiled in her brief oblivion. The passion of her dreams was still about her; her mouth burned, her limbs trembled; the air seemed to her filled with music, like the sound of the mavis singing in the thorn.

Then she remembered; and shuddered; and arose, knowing the sweet, mad dream, which had cheated her, a lie. For she awoke alone.

She did not heed the old man's words, she did not feel his hurt; yet she obeyed him, and left the place, and dragged herself feebly towards Yprés by

the sheer unconscious working of that instinct born of habit which takes the ox or the ass back undriven through the old accustomed ways to stand beside their ploughshare or their harness faithfully and unbidden.

Where the stream ran by the old mill-steps the river reeds were blowing in the wind, with the sun-rays playing in their midst, and the silver wings of the swallows brushing them with a swift caress.

“I thought to be the reed chosen by the gods!” she said bitterly in her heart, “but I am not worthy—even to die.”

For she would have asked of fate no nobler thing than this—to be cut down as the reed by the reaper, if so be that through her the world might be brought to hearken to the music of the lips that she loved.

She drew her aching weary limbs feebly through the leafy ways of the old mill-garden. The first leaves of autumn fluttered down upon her head; the last scarlet of the roses flashed in her path as she went; the winelike odours of the fruits were all about her on the air. It was then fully day. The sun was up; the bells rang the sixth hour far away from the high towers and spires of the town.

At the mill-house, and in the mill-yard, where usually everyone had arisen and were hard at labour whilst the dawn was dark, everything was still. There was no sign of work. The light blazed on the panes of the casements under the eaves, but its summons failed to arouse the sleepers under the roof.

The bees hummed around their houses of straw; the pigeons flew to and fro between the timbers of the walls, and the boughs of the fruit trees. The mule leaned his head over the bar of the gate, and watched with wistful eyes. The cow in her shed lowed, impatient for some human hands to unbar her door, and lead her forth to her green clovered pasture. A dumb boy, who aided in the working of the mill, sat astride of a log of timber, kicking his feet amongst the long grasses, and blowing thistles down above his head upon the breeze.

The silence and the inactivity startled her into a sense of them, as no noise or movement, curses or blows, could have done. She looked around stupidly; the window-shutters of the house-windows were closed, as though it were still night.

She signed rapidly to the boy,

“What has happened? Why is the mill not at work thus late?”

The lad left off blowing the thistle feathers on the wind, and grinned, and answered on his hands,

“Flamma is almost dead, they say.”

And he grinned again, and laughed, as far as his uncouth and guttural noises could be said to approach the triumph and the jubilation of laughter.

She stared at him blankly for awhile, bewildered and shaken from the stupor of her own misery. She had never thought of death and her tyrant in unison.

He had seemed a man formed to live on and on and on unchanging for generations; he was so hard, so unyielding, so hale, so silent, so callous to all pain; it had ever seemed to her—and to the country round,—that death itself would never venture to come to wrestle with him. She stood amongst the red and the purple and the russet gold of the latest summer flowers in the mill-garden, where he had scourged her as a little child for daring to pause and cool her burning face in the sweetness of the white lilies. Could that ruthless arm be unnerved even by age or death—it seemed to her impossible.

All was quite still. Nothing stirred, except the silvery gnats of the morning, and the bees, and the birds in the leaves. There seemed a strange silence everywhere, and the great wheels stood still in the mill-water ; never within the memory of any in that countryside had those wheels failed to turn at sunrise, unless locked by a winter-frost.

She hastened her steps, and went within. The clock ticked, the lean cat mewed ; other sound there was none. She left her wooden shoes at the bottom step, and stole up the steep stairs. The woman Pitchou peered with a scared face out from her master's chamber.

"Where hast been all night ?" she whispered in her grating voice ; "thy grandsire lies a-dying."

"Dying ?"

"Aye," muttered the old peasant. "He had a stroke yester' night, as he came from the corn fair. They brought him home in the cart. He is as good as dead. You are glad."

"Hush !" muttered the girl fiercely ; and she dropt down on the topmost step, and rested her head on her hands. She had nothing to grieve for ; and yet there was that in the coarse congratulation which jarred on her and hurt her.

She thought of Manon Dax dead in the snow ;

she thought of the song-birds dead in the traps ; she thought of the poor coming—coming—coming—through so many winters to beg bread, and going away with empty hands and burdened hearts, cursing God. Was this death-bed all their vengeance ? It was but poor justice, and came late.

Old Pitchou stood and looked at her.

“ Will he leave her the gold or no ? ” she questioned in herself ; musing whether or no it were better to be civil to the one who might inherit all his wealth, or might be cast adrift upon the world—who could say which ?

After awhile Folle-Farine rose silently and brushed her aside, and went into the room.

It was a poor chamber ; with a bed of straw and a rough bench or two, and a wooden cross with a picture of the Ascension hung above it. The square window was open, a knot of golden pear leaves nodded to and fro ; a linnet sang.

On the bed Claudis Flamma lay ; dead already, except for the twitching of his mouth, and the restless wanderings of his eyes. Yet not so lost to life but that he knew her at a glance ; and as she entered, glared upon her, and clenched his numbed hands upon the straw, and with a horrible effort

in his almost lifeless limbs, raised the right arm, that alone had any strength or warmth left in it, and pointed at her with a shriek :

“ She was a saint—a saint : God took her. So I said :—and was proud. While all the while man begot on her *that* ! ”

Then with a ghastly rattle in his throat, he quivered, and lay paralysed again : only the eyes were alive, and were still speaking—awfully.

Folle-Farine went up to his bed, and stood beside it, looking down on him.

“ You mean—my mother ? ”

It was the first time that she had ever said the word. Her voice lingered on the word, as though loth to leave its unfamiliar sweetness.

He lay and looked at her, motionless, impatient, lifeless ; save only for the bleak and bloodshot stare of the stony eyes.

She thought that he had heard ; but he made no sign in answer.

She sank down on her knees beside his bed, and put her lips close to him.

“ Try and speak to me of my mother—once—once,” she murmured, with a pathetic longing in her voice.

A shudder shook his frozen limbs. He made no

answer, he only glared on her with a terrible stare that might be horror, repentance, grief, memory, fear—she could not tell.

Old Pitchou stretched her head from the corner, as a hooded snake from its hole.

“Ask where the money is hid,” she hissed in a shrill whisper. “Ask—ask—while he can yet understand.”

He understood, for a smile grim and horrible disturbed his tight lips a moment.

Folle-Farine did not hear.

“Tell me of my mother ;—tell me, tell me,” she muttered. Since a human love had been born in her heart, she had thought often of that mother whose eyes had never looked on her, and whose arms had never held her.

His face changed, but he did not speak ; he gasped for breath, and lay silent ; his eyes troubled and confused ; it might be that in that moment remorse was with him, and there arose the vain regrets of cruel years.

It might be that dying thus, he knew that from his hearth, as from hell, mother and child had both been driven whilst his lips had talked of God.

A little bell rang softly in the orchard below the

casement ; the clear voice of a young boy singing a canticle crossed the voice of the linnet ; there was a gleam of silver in the sun. The Church bore its Host to the dying man.

They turned her from the chamber.

The eyes of one unsanctified might not gaze upon the mysteries of the blest.

She went out without resistance ; she was oppressed and stupified ; she went to the stairs, and there sat down again, resting her forehead on her hands.

The door of the chamber was a little open, and she could hear the murmurs of the priest's words, and smell the odours of the sacred chrism. A great bitterness came on her mouth.

“ One crust in love—to the poor—in the deadly winters, had been better worth than all this oil and prayer,” she thought. And she could see nothing but the old famished face of Manon Dax in the snow and the moonlight, as the old woman had muttered, “ God is good.”

The offices of the Church ceased ; there reigned an intense stillness ; a stillness as of cold.

Suddenly the voice of Claudis Flamma rang out loud and shrill.

“ I loved her ! Oh Heaven !—*Thou* knowest ! ”

She rose and looked through the space of the open door into the death-chamber.

He had sprung half erect, and with his arms outstretched, gazed at the gladness and the brightness of the day. In his eyes there was a mortal agony, a passion of reproach.

With one last supreme effort, he raised the crucifix which the priests had laid upon his bare anointed breast, and held it aloft, and shook it, and spat on it, and cast it forth from him broken on the ground.

“Even *Thou* art a lie !” he cried—it was the cry of the soul leaving the body,—with the next moment he fell back—dead.

In that one cry his heart had spoken ; the cold, hard heart that yet had shut one great love and one great faith in it, and losing these, had withered and shown no wound.

For what agony had been like unto his ?

Since who could render him back on earth, or in the grave, that pure white soul he had believed in ? Yea—who ? Not man ; not even God.

Therefore, had he suffered without hope.

She went away from the house and down the stairs, and out into the ruddy noon. She took her way by instinct to the orchard, and there sat down

upon a moss-grown stone within the shadow of the leaves.

All sense was deadened in her under a deep unutterable pity.

From where she sat she could see the lattice window, and the gabled end of the chamber, where the linnet sang, and the yellow fruit of the pear-tree swung. All about was the drowsy hot weather of the fruit harvest; the murmur of bees; the sweep of the boughs in the water.

Never, in all the years that they had dwelt together beneath one roof, had any good word or fair glance been given her; he had nourished her on bitterness, and for his wage paid her a curse. Yet her heart was sore for him; and judged him without hatred.

All things seemed clear to her, now that a human love had reached her; and this man also, having loved greatly and been betrayed, became sanctified in her sight.

She forgot his brutality, his avarice, his hatred; she remembered only that he had loved, and in his love been fooled, and so had lost his faith in God and man, and had thus staggered wretchedly down the darkness of his life, hating himself and every other, and hurting every other human thing that

touched him, and crying ever in his blindness,
“ O Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief ! ”

And now he was dead.

What did it matter ?

Whether any soul of his lived again, or whether body and mind both died for ever, what would it benefit all those whom he had slain ?—the little fair birds, poisoned in their song ; the little sickly children, starved in the long winters ; the miserable women, hunted to their graves for some small debt of fuel or bread ; the wretched poor, mocked in their famine by his greed and gain ?

It had been woe for him that his love had wronged him, and turned the hard excellence of his life to stone : but none the less had it been woe to them to fall and perish, because his hand would never spare, his heart would never soften.

Her heart was sick with the cold, bitter, and inexorable law, which had let this man drag out his seventy years, cursing and being cursed ; and lose all things for a dream of God ; and then at the last, upon his death-bed, know that dream likewise to be false.

“ It is so cruel ! It is so cruel ! ” she muttered, where she sat with dry eyes in the shade of the leaves, looking at that window where death was.

And she had reason.

For there is nothing so cruel in life as a Faith ;
—the Faith, whatever its name may be, that draws
a man on all his years through on one narrow
path, by one tremulous light, and then at the last,
with a laugh—drowns him.





CHAPTER V.

THE summer day went by. No one sought her. She did not leave the precincts of the still mill-gardens; a sort of secrecy and stillness seemed to bind her footsteps there, and she dreaded to venture forth, lest she should meet the eyes of Arslàn.

The notary had put seals upon all the cupboards and desks. Two hired watchers sat in the little darkened room above. Some tapers burned beside his bed. The great clock ticked heavily. All the house was closed. Without burned the great roses of the late summer, and the scorch of a cloudless sun. The wheels of the mill stood still. People came and went; many women amongst them. The death of the miller of Yprés was a shock to all his country-side. There was scarce a face that did not lighten, as the peasants going

to their labour met one another in the mellow fields, and called across,

“Hast heard? Flamma is dead—at last.”

No woman came across the meadows with a little candle, and kneeled down by his body and wept and blessed the stiff and withered hands for the good that they had wrought, and for the gifts that they had given.

The hot day-hours stole slowly by; all was noiseless there where she sat, lost in the stupified pain of her thoughts, in the deep shadow of the leaves, where the first breath of the autumn had gilded them and varied them, here and there, with streaks of red.

No one saw her; no one remembered her; no one came to her. She was left in peace, such peace as is the lot of those for whose sigh no human ear is open, for whose need no human hand is stretched.

Once indeed, at noonday, the old serving-woman sought her, and forced on her some simple meal of crusts and eggs.

“For who can tell?” the shrewd old Norman crone thought to herself, “Who can tell? She may get all the treasure: who knows? And if so, it will be best to have been a little good to her this

day, and to seem as if one had forgiven about the chain of coins."

For Pitchou, like the world at large, would pardon offences, if for pardon she saw a sure profit in gold.

"Whom will he have left all the wealth to, think you?" the old peasant muttered, with a cunning glitter in her sunken eyes, standing by her at noon, in the solitude, where the orchards touched the mill-stream.

"The wealth, whose wealth?" Folle-Farine echoed the word stupidly. She had had no thought of the hoarded savings of that long life of theft, and of oppression. She had had no remembrance of any possible inheritance which might accrue to her by this sudden death. She had been too long his goaded and galled slave to be able to imagine herself his heir.

"Aye, his wealth," answered the woman, standing against the water with her wooden shoes deep in dock-leaves and grass, gazing, with a curious eager grasping greed in her eyes, at the creature whom she had always done her best to thwart, to hurt, to starve and to slander. "Aye, his wealth. You who look so sharp after your bits of heathen coins, cannot for sure pretend to forget the value he must have laid

by, living as he lived all the days from his youth upward. There must be a rare mass of gold hid away somewhere or another—the notary knows, I suppose—it is all in the place, that I am sure. He was too wise ever to trust money far from home; he knew well it was a gad-about, that once you part with never comes back to you. It must be all in the secret places; in the thatch, under the hearth-stone, in the rafters, under the bricks. And, may be, there will be quite a fortune. He made so much, and he lived so near. Where think you it will go?”

A faint bitter smile flickered a moment over Folle-Farine’s mouth.

“It should go to the poor. It belongs to them. It was all coined out of their hearts and their bodies.”

“Then you have no hope for yourself:—you?”

“I?”

She muttered the word dreamily; and raised her aching eyelids, and stared in stupefaction at the old, haggard, dark, ravenous face of Pitchou.

“Pshaw! You cannot cheat me that way,” said the woman, moving away through the orchard-branches, muttering to herself. “As if a thing of hell like you, ever served like a slave all these years, on any other hope, than the hope of the gold!

Well,—as for me,—I never pretend to lie in that fashion. If it had not been for the hope of a share in the gold, I would never have eaten for seventeen years the old wretch's mouldy crusts and lentil-washings."

She hobbled, grumbling on her way back to the house, through the russet shadows and the glowing gold of the orchards.

Folle-Farine sat by the water, musing on the future which had opened to her with the woman's words of greed.

Before another day had sped, it was possible,—so even said one who hated her, and begrudged her every bit and drop that she had taken at the miser's board—possible that she would enter into the heritage of all that this long life, spent in rapacious greed and gain, had gathered together.

One night earlier, paradise itself would have seemed to open before her with such a hope; for she would have hastened to the feet of Arslàn, and there poured all treasure that chance might have given her, and would have cried out of the fulness of her heart, "Take, enjoy, be free, do as you will. So that you make the world of men own your greatness, I will live as a beggar all the years of my life, and think myself richer than kings!"

But now, what use would it be, though she were called to an empire ? She would not dare to say to him, as a day earlier she would have said with her first breath, "All that is mine, is thine."

She would not even dare to give him all and creep away unseen, unthanked, unhonoured into obscurity and oblivion, for had he not said, "You have no right to burden me with debt."

Yet as she sat there lonely amongst the grasses, with the great mill-wheels at rest in the water, and the swallows skimming the surface, that was freed from the churn and the foam of the wheels as though the day of Flamma's death had been a saint's day, the fancy which had been set so suddenly before her, dazzled her, and her aching brain and her sick despair, could not choose but play with it despite themselves.

If the fortune of Flamma came to her, it might be possible, she thought, to spend it so as to release him from his bondage, without knowledge of his own ; so to fashion with it a golden temple and a golden throne for the works of his hand, that the world, which as they all said worshipped gold, should be forced to gaze in homage on the creations of his mind and hand.

And yet he had said greater shame there could

come to no man, than to rise by the aid of a woman. The apple of life, however sweet and fair in its colour, and savour, would be as poison in his mouth if her hand held it. That she knew, and in the humility of her great and reverent love, she submitted without question to its cruelty.

At night she went within to break her fast, and try to rest a little. The old peasant woman served her silently, and for the first time willingly. "Who can say?" the Norman thought to herself, "Who can say? She may yet get it all, who knows?"

At night as she slept, Pitchou peered at her, shading the light from her eyes.

"If only I could know who gets the gold?" she muttered. Her sole thought was the money; the money that the notary held under his lock and seal. She wished now that she had dealt better with the girl sometimes; it would have been safer, and it could have done no harm.

With earliest dawn Folle-Farine fled again to the refuge of the wood. She shunned, with the terror of a hunted doe, the sight of people coming and going, the priests and the gossips, the sights and the sounds, and none sought her.

All the day through she wandered in the cool dewy orchard ways.

Beyond the walls of the foliage, she saw the shrouded window, the flash of the crucifix, the throngs of the mourners, the glisten of the white robes. She heard the deep sonorous swelling of the chants ; she saw the little procession come out from the doorway and cross the old wooden bridge, and go slowly through the sunlight of the meadows. Many of the people followed, singing, and bearing tapers ; for he who was dead had stood well with the Church, and from such there still issues for the living a fair savour.

No one came to her. What had they to do with her ? a creature unbaptised, and an outcast ?

She watched the little line fade away, over the green and golden glory of the fields. She did not think of herself—since Arslàn had looked at her, in his merciless scorn, she had had neither past nor future.

It did not even occur to her, that her home would be in this place no longer ; it was as natural to her, as its burrow to the cony, its hole to the fox. It did not occur to her, that the death of this her tyrant, could not but make some sudden and startling change in all her ways and fortune.

She waited in the woods all day ; it was so strange a sense to her to be free of the bitter

bondage that had lain on her life so long ; she could not at once arise and understand the meaning of her freedom ; she was like a captive soldier, who has dragged the cannon-ball so long, that when it is loosened from his limb, the limb feels strange, and his step sounds unaccompanied.

She was thankful, too, for the tortured beasts, and the hunted birds ; she fed them, and looked in their gentle eyes, and told them that they were free. But in her own heart one vain wish only ached—she thought,—

“ If only I might die for him ;—as the reed for the god ! ”

The people returned, and then after awhile all went forth again ; they and their priests with them. The place was left alone. The old solitude reigned ; the sound of the wood-dove only filled the quiet.

The day grew on ; in the orchards it was already twilight, whilst on the waters and in the open lands farther away the sun was bright. There was a wicket close by under the boughs ; a bridle-path ran by, moss-grown, and little used, but leading from the public road beyond.

From the gleam of the twisted fruit trees a low flute-like noise came to her ear in the shadow of the solitude.

“Folle-Farine,—I go on your errand. If you repent, there is time yet to stay me. Say—do you bid me still set your Norse-god free from the Cave of the Snakes?”

She, startled, looked up into the roofing of the thick foliage; she saw shining on her with a quiet smile the eyes which she had likened to the eyes of the Red Mouse. They scanned her gravely and curiously: they noted the change in her since the last sun had set.

“What did he say to you for your gold?” the old man asked.

She was silent; the blood of an intolerable shame burned in her face; she had not thought that she had betrayed her motive in seeking a price for her chain of coins.

He laughed a little softly.

“Ah! You fancied I did not know your design when you came so bravely to sell your Moorish dancing-gear. Oh, Folle-Farine!—female things with eyes like yours, must never hope to keep a secret?”

She never answered; she had risen and stood rooted to the ground, her head hung down, her breast heaving, the blood coming and going in her intolerable pain, as though she flushed and froze under a surgeon’s probe.

“What did he say to you?” pursued her questioner. “There should be but one language possible from a man of his years to a woman of yours.”

She lifted her eyes and spoke at last.

“He said that I did him a foul shame : the gold lies in the sands of the river.”

She was strong to speak the truth inflexibly to the full ; for its degradation to herself she knew was honour to the absent. It showed him strong and cold and untempted, preferring famine and neglect and misery to any debt or burden of a service done.

The old man, leaning on the wooden bar of the gate amongst the leaves, looked at her long and thoughtfully.

“He would not take your poor little pieces ? You mean that ?”

She gave a sign of assent.

“That was a poor reward to you, Folle-Farine !”

Her lips grew white and shut together.

“Mine was the fault,” she muttered—“the folly. He was right, no doubt.”

“You are very loyal. I think your Northern god was only thus cold because your gift was such a little one, Folle-Farine.”

A strong light flashed on him from her eyes.

"It would have been the same if I had offered him an empire."

"You are so sure? Does he hate you then—this god of yours?"

She quivered from head to foot; but her courage would not yield, her faith would not be turned.

"Need a man hate the dust under his foot?" she muttered in her teeth; "because it is a thing too lowly for him to think of as he walks."

"You are very truthful."

She was silent; standing there in the shadow of the great mill-timbers.

The old man watched her with calm approving eyes, as he might have watched a statue of bronze. He was a great man, a man of much wealth, of wide power, of boundless self-indulgence, of a keen serene wisdom, which made his passions docile ministers to his pleasure, and never allowed them any mastery over himself. He was studying the shape of her limbs, the hues of her skin, the lofty slender stature of her form, and the cloud of her hair that was like the golden gleaming mane of a young desert mare.

"All these in Paris," he was thinking. "Just as she is, with just the same bare feet and limbs,

the same untrammelled gait, the same flash of scarlet round her loins, only to the linen tunic a hem of gold, and on the breast a flame of opals. Paris would say that even I had never in my many years done better. The poor barbarian! she sells her little brazen sequins, and thinks them her only treasure, whilst she has all that! Is Arslàn blind, or is he only tired?"

But he spake none of his thoughts aloud. He was too wary to scare the prey he meant to secure with any screams of the sped arrow, or any sight of the curled lasso.

"Well," he said, simply, "I understand; your eagle, in recompense for your endeavours to set him free, only tears your heart with his talons? It is the way of eagles. He has wounded you sorely. And the wound will bleed many a day."

She lifted her head.

"Have I complained?—have I asked your pity, or any man's?"

"Oh, no, you are very strong! So is a lioness; but she dies of a man's wound sometimes. He has been very base to you."

"He has done as he thought it right to do. Who shall lay blame on him for that?"

"Your loyalty says so; you are very brave, no

doubt. But tell me, do you still wish this man, who wounds you so cruelly, set free ?”

“ Yes.”

“ What, still ?”

“ Why not ?”

“ Why not ? Only this : that once he is let loose your very memory will be shaken from his thoughts as the dust of the summer, to which you liken yourself, is shaken from his feet !”

“ No doubt.”

She thought she did not let him see the agony he dealt her ; she stood unflinching, her hands crossed upon her breast, her head drooped, her eyes looking far from him to where the fading sunlight gleamed still upon the reaches of the river.

“ No doubt,” he echoed. “ And yet I think you hardly understand. This man is a great artist. He has a great destiny, if he once can gain the eye and the ear of the world. The world will fear him, and curse him always ; he is very merciless to it ; but if he once conquer fame, that fame will be one to last as long as the earth lasts. That I believe. Well, give this man what he longs for and strives for, a life in his fame which shall not die so long as men have breath to speak of art. What will you be in that great drunken dream of his, if once we make it true

for him? Not even a remembrance, Folle-Farine. For though you have fancied that you, by your beauty, would at least abide upon his canvas, and so go on to immortality with his works and name, you seem not to know that so much also will do any mime who lets herself for hire on a tavern stage, or any starveling who makes her daily bread by giving her face and form to a painter's gaze. Child! what you have thought noble, men and women have decreed one of the vilest means by which a creature traffics in her charms. The first lithe-limbed model that he finds in the cities will displace you on his canvas and in his memory. Shall he go free—to forget you?"

She listened dumbly; her attitude unchanging, as she had stood in other days, under the shadow of the boughs, to receive the stripes of her master.

"He shall be free—to forget me."

The words were barely audible, but they were inflexible, as they were echoed through her locked teeth.

The eyes of her tormentor watched her with a wondering admiration; yet he could not resist the pleasure of an added cruelty, as the men of the torture-chambers of old strained once more the fair fettered form of a female captive, that they might see a

little longer those bright limbs quiver, and those bare nerves heave.

“ Well ; be it so if you will it. Only think long enough. For strong though you are, you are also weak ; for you are of your mother’s sex, Folle-Farine. You may repent. Think well. You are no more to him than your eponymus, the mill-dust. You have said so to yourself. But you are beautiful in your barbarism ; and here you are always near him ; and with a man who has no gold to give, a woman need have few rivals to fear. If his heart eat itself out here in solitude, soon or late, he will be yours, Folle-Farine. A man, be he what he will, cannot live long without some love, more or less, for some woman. A little while, and your Norse-god alone here, disappointed, embittered, friendless, galled by poverty, and powerless to escape, will turn to you, and find a sweetness on your lips, a balm in your embrace, an opium draught for an hour, at least, in that wonderful beauty of yours. A woman who is beautiful, and who has youth, and who has passion, need never fail to make a love-light beam in the eyes of a man, if only she know how to wait, if only she be the sole blossom that grows in his pathway, the sole fruit within reach of his hands. Keep him here,

and soon or late, out of sheer despair of any other paradise, he will make his paradise in your breast. Do you doubt? Child, I have known the world many years, but this one thing I have ever known to be stronger than any strength a man can bring against it to withstand it—this one thing which fate has given you, the bodily beauty of a woman.”

His voice ceased softly in the twilight—this voice of Mephistopheles—which tempted her but for the sheer sole pleasure of straining this strength to see if it should break—of deriding this faith to see if it would bend—of alluring this soul to see if it would fall.

She stood abased in a piteous shame—the shame that any man should thus read her heart,—which seemed to burn and wither up all liberty, all innocence, all pride in her, and leave her a thing too utterly debased to bear the gaze of any human eyes, to bear the light of any noonday sun.

And yet the terrible sweetness of the words tempted her with such subtle force: the passions of a fierce, amorous race ran in her blood—the ardour and the liberty of an outlawed and sensual people were bred with her flesh and blood,—to have been the passion-toy of the man she loved for one single day,—to have felt for one brief summer night his arms

hold her and his kisses answer hers, she would have consented to die a hundred deaths in uttermost tortures when the morrow should have dawned, and would have died rejoicing, crying to the last breath,—

“I have lived: it is enough!”

He might be hers! The mere thought, uttered in another's voice, thrilled through her with a tumultuous ecstasy; hot as flame, potent as wine.

He might be hers—all her own—each pulse of his heart echoing hers, each breath of his lips spent on her own. He might be hers!—she hid her face upon her hands; a million tongues of fire seemed to curl about her and lap her life. The temptation was stronger than her strength.

She was a friendless, loveless, nameless thing, and she had but one idolatry and one passion, and for this joy that they set to her lips she would have given her body and her soul. Her soul—if the gods and man allowed her one—her soul and all her life, mortal and immortal, for one single day of Arslàn's love. Her soul, for ever, to any hell they would—but his?

Not for this had she sold her life to the gods—not for this; not for the raptures of passion, the trance of the senses, the heaven of self,

What she had sworn to them, if they saved him, was for ever to forget in him herself, to suffer dumbly for him, and, whensoever they would, in his stead to die.

“Choose,” said the soft wooing voice of her tempter, while his gaze smiled on her through the twilight. “Shall he consume his heart here in solitude till he loves you perforce, or shall he go free amongst the cities of men, to remember you no more than he remembers the reeds by the river?”

The reeds by the river.

The chance words that he used, by the mere hazards of speech, cut the bonds of passion which were binding so closely about her.

As the river reed to the god, so she had thought that her brief span of life might be to the immortality of his; was this the fulfilling of her faith? To hold him here with his strength in chains, and his genius perishing in darkness, that she, the thing of an hour, might know delight in the reluctant love, in the wearied embrace, of a man heart-sick and heart-broken?

She shook the deadly sweetness of the beguilement off her as she would have shaken an asp's coils off her wrist, and rose against it, and was once more strong.

“What have you to do with me?” she muttered, feebly, while the fierce glare of her eyes burned through the gloom of the leaves. “Keep your word; set him free. His freedom let him use—as he will.”

Then, ere he could arrest her flight, she had plunged into the depths of the orchards, and was lost in their flickering shadows.

Sartorian did not seek to pursue her. He turned and went thoughtfully and slowly back by the grass-grown footpath through the little wood, along by the river side, to the water-tower. His horses and his people waited near, but it suited him to go thither on this errand on foot and alone.

“The Red Mouse does not dwell in that soul as yet. That sublime unreason—that grand barbaric madness! And yet both will fall to gold, as that fruit falls to the touch,” he thought, as he brushed a ripe yellow pear from the shelter of the reddening leaves, and watched it drop, and crushed it gently with his foot, and smiled as he saw that though so golden on the rind, and so white and so fragrant in the flesh, at the core was a rotten speck, in which a little black worm was twisting.

He had shaken it down from idleness; where he left it, crushed in the public pathway, a swarm of

ants and flies soon crawled, and flew, and fought, and fastened, and fed on the fallen purity, which the winds had once tossed up to heaven, and the sun had once kissed into bloom.





CHAPTER VI.

THROUGH the orchards, as his footsteps died away, there came a shrill scream on the silence, which only the sighing of the cushats had broken.

It was the voice of the old serving-woman, who called on her name from the porch.

In the old instinct, born of long obedience, she drew herself wearily through the tangled ways of the gardens and over the threshold of the house.

She had lost all remembrance of Flamma's death, and of the inheritance of his wealth. She only thought of those great and noble fruits of a man's genius which she had given up all to save ; she only thought ceaselessly, in the sickness of her heart, "Will he forget ?—forget quite—when he is free ?"

The peasant standing in the porch with arms a-kimbo, and the lean cat rubbing ravenous sides

against her shoes, peered forth from under the rich red leaves of the creepers that shrouded the pointed roof of the door-way.

Her wrinkled face was full of malignity ; her toothless mouth smiled ; her eyes were full of a greedy triumph. Before her was the shady, quiet, leafy garden, with the water running clear beneath the branches ; behind her was the kitchen, with its floor of tiles, its strings of food, its wood-piled hearth, its crucifix, and its images of saints.

She looked at the tired limbs of the creature whom she had always hated for her beauty and her youth ; at the droop of the proud head, at the pain and the exhaustion which every line of the face and the form spoke so plainly ; at the eyes which burned so strangely as she came through the grey pure air, and yet had such a look in them of sightlessness and stupor.

“She has been told,” thought the old serving-woman. “She has been told, and her heart breaks for the gold.”

The thought was sweet to her—precious with the preciousness of vengeance.

“Come within,” she said, with a grim smile about her mouth. “I will give thee a crust and a drink of milk. None shall say I cannot act like a

Christian ; and to-night I will let thee rest here in the loft, but no longer. With the break of day thou shalt tramp. We are Christians here."

Folle-Farine looked at her with blind eyes, comprehending nothing that she spoke.

"You called me?" she asked, the old mechanical formula of servitude coming to her lips by sheer unconscious instinct.

"Ay, I called. I would have thee to know that I am mistress here now ; and I will have no vile things gad about in the night so long as they eat of my bread. To-night thou shalt rest here, I say ; so much will I do for sake of thy mother, though she was a foul light o' love, when all men deemed her a saint ; but to-morrow thou shalt tramp. Such hell-spawn as thou art may not lie on a bed of holy church."

Folle-Farine gazed at her, confused and still, not comprehending ; scarcely awake to the voice which thus adjured her ; all her strength spent and bruised, after the struggle of the temptation which had assailed her.

"You mean," she muttered, "you mean——What would you tell me ? I do not know."

The familiar place reeled around her. The saints and the satyrs on the carved gables grinned on her

horribly. The yellow house-leek on the roof seemed to her so much gold, which had a tongue, and muttered, "You prate of the soul. I alone am the soul of the world."

All the green, shadowy, tranquil ways grew strange to her; the earth shook under her feet; the heavens circled around her:—and Pitchou, looking on her, thought that she was stunned by the loss of the miser's treasure!

She!—in whose whole burning veins there ran only one passion, in whose crushed brain there was only one thought—"Will he forget—forget quite—when he is free?"

The old woman stretched her head forward, and cackled out eager, hissing, tumultuous words.

"Hast not heard? No? Well, see then. Some said you should be sent for, but the priest and I said No. Neither Law nor Church count the love-begotten. Flamma died worth forty thousand francs, set aside all his land and household things. God rest his soul! He *was* a man. He forgot my faithful service, true, but the good almoner will remember all that to me. Forty thousand francs! What a man! And hardly a nettle boiled in oil would he eat some days together. Where does this money go—eh, eh? Canst guess?"

“Go?”

Pitchou watched her grimly, and laughed aloud.

“Ah, ah! I know. So you dared to hope too? Oh fool! What thing did ever he hate as he hated your shadow on the wall? The money, and the lands, and the things—every coin, every inch, every crumb—is willed away to the Bishop, to the holy Bishop in the town yonder, to hold for the will of God and the glory of his kingdom. And masses will be said for his soul, daily, in the cathedral; and the gracious almoner has as good as said that the mill shall be let to Francvron, the baker, who is old and has no women to his house; and that I shall dwell here and manage all things, and rule Francvron, and end my days in the chimney corner. And I will stretch a point and let you lie in the hay to-night, but to-morrow you must tramp, for the devil’s daughter and Holy Church will scarce go to roost together.”

Folle-Farine heard her stupidly, and stupidly gazed around; she did not understand. She had never had any other home, and, in a manner, even in the apathy of a far greater woe, she clove to this place; to its familiarity, and its silence, and its old woodland ways.

“Go!”—she looked down through the aisles

of the boughs dreamily ; in a vague sense she felt the sharpness of desolation which repulses the creature whom no human heart desires, and whom no human voice bids stay.

“ Yes. Go ; and that quickly,” said the peasant with a sardonic grin. “ I serve the Church now. It is not for me to harbour such as thee ; nor is it fit to take the bread of the poor and the pious to feed lips as accursed as are thine. Thou may’st lie here to-night—I would not be over harsh—but tarry no longer. Take a sup and a bit, and to-bed. Dost hear ? ”

Folle-Farine, without a word in answer, turned on her heel and left her.

The old woman watched her shadow pass across the threshold, and away down the garden paths between the green lines of the clipped box, and vanish beyond the fall of drooping fig boughs and the walls of ivy and of laurel ; then with a chuckle she poured out her hot coffee, and sat in her corner and made her evening meal well pleased ; comfort was secured her for the few years which she had to live, and she was revenged for the loss of the sequins.

“ How well it is for me that I went to mass every Saint’s-day,” she thought, foreseeing easy years and

plenty under the rule of the Church and of old deaf Francvron the baker.

Folle-Farine mounted the wooden ladder to the hayloft which had been her sleeping-chamber, there took the little linen and the few other garments which belonged to her, folded them together in her winter sheep-skin, and went down the wooden steps once more, and out of the mill-garden across the bridge into the woods.

She had no fixed purpose even for the immediate hour; she had not even a tangible thought for her future. She acted on sheer mechanical impulse, like one who does sane things unconsciously, walking abroad in the trance of sleep. That she was absolutely destitute scarcely bore any sense to her. She had never realised that this begrudged roof and scanty fare, which Flamma had bestowed on her, had, wretched though they were, yet been all the difference between home and homelessness—between existence and starvation.

She wandered on aimlessly through the woods.

She paused a moment on the river's edge, and turned and looked back at the mill and the house. From where she stood, she could see its brown gables and its peaked roof rising from masses of orchard-foliage, and green garden leaves; further

round it, closed the dark belt of the sweet chestnut woods.

She looked ; and great salt tears rushed into her hot eyes and blinded them.

She had been hated by those who dwelt there, and had there known only pain, and toil, and blows, and bitter words. And yet the place itself was dear to her : its homely and simple look, its quiet garden ways, its dells of leafy shadow, its bright and angry waters, its furred and feathered creatures that gave it life and loveliness,—these had been her consolations often,—these, in a way, she loved.

Such as it was, her life had been bound up with it ; and though often its cool pale skies and level lands had been a prison to her, yet her heart clove to it in this moment when she left it—for ever. She looked once at it long and lingeringly, full in the light of the rising sun ; then turned and went on her way.

She walked slowly through the cool evening shadows, while the birds fluttered about her head. She did not comprehend the terrible fate that had befallen her. She did not think that it was horrible to have no canopy but the clear sky, and no food but the grain rubbed from the ripe wheat-ears.

The fever of conscious passion which had been born in her, and the awe of the lonely death that she had witnessed, were on her too heavily, and with too dreamy and delirious an absorption, to leave any room in her thoughts for the bodily perils or the bodily privations of her fate.

Some vague expectancy of some great horror, she knew not what, was on her. She was as in a trance, her brain was giddy, her eyes blind. Though she walked straightly, bearing her load upon her head, on and on as through the familiar paths, she yet had no goal, no sense of what she meant to do, or whither she desired to go.

The people were still about, going from their work in the fields, and their day at the town-market, to their homesteads and huts. Every one of them cast some word at her. For the news had spread by sunset over all the country-side that Flamma's treasure was gone to holy Church.

They were spoken in idleness, but they were sharp, flouting, merciless arrows of speech, that struck her hardly as the speakers cast them, and laughed, and passed by her. She gave no sign that she heard, not by so much as the quiver of a muscle or the glance of an eye; but she, nevertheless, was stung by them to the core. For they

showed her how worthless and friendless a thing had dared to dream that she might be of service to the life of Arslàn.

Not one of them, man or boy, but made a mock of her as they trooped by through the purpling leaves or the tall seed-grasses. Not one of them, mother or maiden, that gave a gentle look at her, or paused to remember that she was homeless, and knew no more where to lay her head that night than any sick hart driven from its kind.

She met many in the soft grey and golden evening, in the fruit-hung ways, along the edge of the meadows; fathers with their little children running by them, laden with plumes of nightshade; mothers bearing their youngest born before them on the high sheepskin saddle; young lovers talking together as they drove the old cow to her byre; old people counting their market gains cheerily; children paddling knee-deep in the brooks for cresses. None of them had a kindly glance for her; —all had a flouting word. There was not one who offered her so much as a draught of milk; not one who wished her so much as a brief good-night.

“She will quit the country now; that is one good thing,” she heard many of them say of her. And they spoke of Flamma, and praised him; saying,

how pure as myrrh in the nostrils was the death of one who feared God.

The night came on nearer; the ways grew more lonely; the calf bleating sought its dam, the sheep folded down close together, the lights came out under the lowly roofs; now and then from some open window in the distance there came the sound of voices singing together; now and then there fell across her path two shadows turning one to the other.

She only was alone.

What did she seek to do?

She paused on a little slip of moss-green timber that crossed the water in the open plain, and looked down at herself in the shining stream. None desired her—none remembered her; none said to her, “Stay with us a little, for love’s sake.”

“Surely I must be vile as they say, that all are against me!” she thought; and she pondered wearily in her heart where her sin against them could lie.

That brief delirious trance of joy that had come to her with the setting of the last day’s sun, had with the sun sunk away. The visions which had haunted her sleep under the thorn-tree whilst the thrush sang, had been killed under the

cold and bitterness of the waking world. She wondered, while her face grew red with shame, what she had been mad enough to dream of in that sweet cruel slumber. For him—she felt that sooner than again look upward to his eyes she would die by a thousand deaths.

What was she to him?—a barbarous, worthless, and unlovely thing, whose very service was despised, whose very sacrifice was condemned.

“I would live as a leper all the days of my life, if, first, I might be fair in his sight one hour!” she thought; and she was unconscious of horror or of impiety in the ghastly desire, because she had but one religion, this—her love.

She crossed the little bridge, and sat down to rest on the root of an old oak on the edge of the fields of poppies.

The evening had fallen quite. There was a bright moon on the edge of the plain. The cresset lights of the cathedral glowed through the dusk. All was purple and grey and still. There were the scents of heavy earths and wild thymes, and the breath of grazing herds. The little hamlets were but patches of darker shade on the soft brown shadows of the night. White sea-mists,

curling and rising, chased each other over the dim world.

She sat motionless, leaning her head upon her hands.

She could not weep, as other creatures could. The hours drew on. She had no home to go to; but it was not for this that she sorrowed.

Afar off, a step trod down the grasses. A hawk rustled through the gloom. A rabbit fled across the path. The boughs were put aside by a human hand; Arslàn came out from the darkness of the woods before her.

With a sharp cry she sprang to her feet and fled, on one passionate reasonless instinct to hide herself for ever and for ever from the only eyes she loved.

Before her were the maze of the poppy-fields. In the moonlight their blossom, so gorgeous at sunset or at noon, lost all their scarlet gaud and purple pomp, and drooped like discrowned kings stripped bare in the midnight of calamity.

Their colourless flowers writhed and twined about her ankles. Her brown limbs glistened in the gleam from the skies. She tightened her red girdle round her loins and ran, as a doe runs to reach the sanctuary.

Long withes of trailing grasses, weeds that grew amongst the grasses, caught her fleet feet and stopped her. The earth was wet with dew. A tangle of boughs and brambles filled the path. For once, her sure steps failed her. She faltered and fell.

Ere he could touch her, she rose again. The scent of the wet leaves was in her hair. The rain-drops glistened on her feet. The light of the stars seemed in her burning eyes. Around her were the gleam of the night, the scent of the flowers, the smell of woods. On her face the moon shone.

She was like a creature born from the freshness of dews, from the odour of foliage, from the hues of the clouds, from the foam of the brooks, from all things of the woods and the water. In that moment she was beautiful with the beauty of women.

“If only she could content me!” he thought. If only he had cared for the song of the reed by the river!

But he cared nothing at all for anything that lived; and a pursuit that was passionless of a thing that was helpless, seemed to him base; and his feet were set on a stony and narrow road where he would not encumber his strength with a thing of her sex, lest the burden should draw him backward one rood on his way.

He had never loved her; he never would love her; his eyes were awake to her beauty, indeed, and his reason owned it beyond all usual gifts of her sex. But his senses remained cold to it: he had used it in the service of his art, and therein had scrutinised, and pourtrayed, and debased it, until it had lost to him all that fanciful sanctity, all that half-mysterious charm, which arouse the passion of love in a man to a woman.

So he let her be, and stood by her in the dusk of the night with no light in his own eyes.

“Do not fly from me,” he said to her. “I have sought you, to ask your forgiveness, and——”

She stood silent, her head bent; her hands were crossed upon her chest in the posture habitual to her under any pain; her face was shrouded in the shadow; her little bundle of clothes had dropped on the grasses, and was hidden by them. Of Flamma’s death and of her homelessness he had heard nothing.

“I was harsh to you,” he said, gently. “I spoke, in the bitterness of my heart, unworthily. I was stung with a great shame;—I forgot that you could not know. Can you forgive?”

“The madness was mine,” she muttered. “It was I, who forgot——”

Her voice was very faint, and left her lips with effort; she did not look up; she stood bloodless, breathless, swaying to and fro, as a young tree which has been cut through near the root sways ere it falls. She knew well what his words would say.

“You are generous, and you shame me—indeed—thus,” he said with a certain softness as of unwilling pain in his voice which shook its coldness and serenity.

This greatness in her, this wondrous faithfulness to himself, this silence, which bore all wounds from his hand, and was never broken to utter one reproach against him, these moved him. He could not choose but see that this nature, which he bruised and forsook, was noble beyond any common nobility of any human thing.

“I have deserved little at your hands, and you have given me much,” he said slowly. “I feel base and unworthy; for—I have sought you to bid you farewell.”

She had awaited her death-blow; she received its stroke without a sound.

She did not move, nor cry out, nor make any sign of pain, but standing there her form curled within itself, as a withered fern curls, and all her

beauty changed like a fresh flower that is held in a flame.

She did not look at him ; but waited, with her head bent, and her hands crossed on her breast as a criminal waits for his doom.

His nerve nearly failed him ; his heart nearly yielded. He had no love for her ; she was nothing to him. No more than any one of the dark, nude savage women who had sat to his art on the broken steps of ruined Temples of the Sun ; or the antelope-eyed creatures of desert and plain, who had come before him in the light of the East, and had passed as the shadows passed, and, like them, were forgotten.

She was nothing to him. And yet he could not choose but think—all this mighty love, all this majestic strength, all this superb and dreamy loveliness would die out here, as the evening colours had dyed out of the skies in the west, none pausing even to note that they were dead.

He knew that he had but to say to her, “Come !” and she would go beside him, whether to shame or ignominy, or famine or death, triumphant and rejoicing as the martyrs of old went to the flames, which were to them the gates of paradise.

He knew that there would not be a blow his hand

could deal which could make her deem him cruel ; he knew that there would be no crime which he could bid her commit for him which would not seem to her a virtue ; he knew that for one hour of his love she would slay herself by any death he told her ; he knew that the deepest wretchedness lived through by his side would be sweeter and more glorious than any kingdom of the world or heaven. And he knew well that to no man is it given to be loved twice with such love as this.

Yet,—he loved not her ; and he was, therefore, strong, and he drove the death-stroke home, with pity, with compassion, with gentleness, yet surely home—to the heart.

“ A stranger came to me an hour or more ago,” he said to her ; and it seemed even to him as though he slew a life godlier and purer and stronger than his own,—“ An old man, who gave no name. I have seen his face—far away, long ago—I am not sure. The memory is too vague. He seemed a man of knowledge, and a man critical and keen. That study of you—the one amongst the poppies,—you remember—took his eyes and pleased him. He bore it away with him, and left in its stead a roll of paper money—money enough to take me back amongst men—to set me free for a

little space. Oh, child ! you have seen—this hell on earth kills me. It is a death in life. It has made me brutal to you sometimes ; sometimes I must hurt something, or go mad.”

She was silent ; her attitude had not changed, but all her loveliness was like one of the poppies that his foot had trodden on, discoloured, broken, ruined. She stood as though changed to a statue of bronze.

He looked on her, and knew that no creature had ever loved him as this creature had loved. But of love he wanted nothing,—it was weariness to him ; all he desired was power amongst men.

“ I have been cruel to you,” he said, suddenly. “ I have stung and wounded you often. I have dealt with your beauty as with this flower under my foot. I have had no pity for you. Can you forgive me ere I go ? ”

“ You have no sins to me,” she made answer to him. She did not stir ; nor did the deadly calm on her face change ; but her voice had a harsh metallic sound, like the jar of a bell that is broken.

He was silent also. The coldness and the arrogance of his heart were pained and humbled by her pardon of them. He knew that he had been pitiless to her—with a pitilessness less excusable

than that which is born of the fierceness of passion and the idolatrous desires of the senses. Man would have held him blameless here, because he had forborn to pluck for his own delight this red and gold reed in the swamp ; but he himself knew well that, nevertheless, he had trodden its life out, and so bruised it, as he went, that never would any wind of heaven breathe music through its shattered grace again.

“ When do you go ? ” she asked. Her voice had still the same harsh broken sound in it. She did not lift the lids of her eyes ; her arms were crossed upon her breast ;—all the ruins of the trampled poppy-blossom were about her, blood-red as a field where men have fought and died.

He answered her, “ At dawn.”

“ And where ? ”

“ To Paris. I will find fame—or a grave.”

A long silence fell between them.

The church chimes, far away in the darkness, tolled the ninth hour. She stood passive, colourless as the poppies were, bloodless from the thick, dull beating of her heart. The purple shadow and the white stars swam around her. Her heart was broken ; but she gave no sign. It was her nature to suffer to the last in silence.

He looked at her, and his own heart softened ; almost he repented him.

He stretched his arms to her, and drew her into them, and kissed the dew-laden weight of her hair, and the curling lithe form, whence all warmth had died, and the passionate loveliness, which was cast to him, to be folded in his bosom or thrust away by his foot—as he chose.

“ Oh, child, forgive me, and forget me,” he murmured. “ I have been base to you,—brutal, and bitter, and cold oftentimes ;—yet I would have loved you, if I could. Love would have been youth, folly, oblivion ; all the nearest likeness that men get of happiness on earth. But love is dead in me, I think, otherwise,—”

She burned like fire, and grew cold as ice in his embrace. Her brain reeled ; her sight was blind. She trembled as she had never done under the sharpest throes of Flamma’s scourge.

Suddenly she cast her arms about his throat and clung to him, and kissed him in answer with that strange, mute, terrible passion with which the lips, of the dying kiss the warm and living face that bends above them, on which they know they never again will rest.

Then she broke from him, and sprang into the

maze of the moonlit fields, and fled from him like a stag that bears its death-shot in it, and knows it, and seeks to hide itself and die unseen.

He pursued her, urged by a desire that was cruel, and a sorrow that was tender. He had no love for her; and yet—now that he had thrown her from him for ever—he would fain have felt those hot mute lips tremble again in their terrible eloquence upon his own.

But he sought her in vain. The shadows of the night hid her from him.

He went back to his home alone.

“It is best so,” he said to himself.

For the life that lay before him he needed all his strength, all his coldness, all his cruelty. And she was only a frail female thing—a reed of the river, songless, and blown by the wind as the rest were.

He returned to his solitude, and lit his lamp, and looked on the creations which alone he loved.

“They shall live,—or I will die,” he said in his own heart. With the war to which he went what had any amorous toy to do?

That night Hermes had no voice for him.

Else might the wise god had said, “Many reeds grow together by the river, and men tread them at

will, and none are the worse. But in one reed of a million song is hidden ; and when a man carelessly breaks that reed in twain, he may miss its music often and long,—yea, all the years of his life.”

But Hermes that night spake not.

And he brake his reed, and cast it behind him.





CHAPTER VII.

WHEN the dawn came, it found her lying face downward among the rushes by the river. She had run on, and on, and on blindly, not knowing where she fled, with the strange force which despair lends; then suddenly had dropped, as a young bull drops in the circus with the steel sheathed in its brain. There she had remained insensible, the blood flowing a little from her mouth.;

It was quite lonely by the waterside. A crane among the sedges, an owl on the wind, a water-lizard under the stones, such were the only moving things. It was in a solitary bend of the stream; its banks were green and quiet; there were no dwellings near; and there was no light anywhere, except the dull glow of the lamp above the Calvary.

No one found her. A young fox came and smelt at her, and stole frightened away. That was all. A sharp wind rising with the reddening of the east

blew on her, and recalled her to consciousness after many hours. When her eyes at length opened, with a blank stare upon the greyness of the shadows, she lifted herself a little and sat still, and wondered what had chanced to her.

The first rays of the sun rose over the dim blue haze of the horizon. She looked at it and tried to remember, but failed. Her mind was sick and dull.

A little beetle, green and bronze, climbed in and out amongst the sand of the river shore; her eyes vacantly followed the insect's aimless circles. She tried to think, and could not; her thoughts went feebly and madly round and round, round and round, as the beetle went in his maze of sand. It was all so grey, so still, so chill, she was afraid of it. Her limbs were stiffened by the exposure and dews of the night. She shivered and was cold.

The sun rose—a globe of flame above the edge of the world. Memory flashed on her with its light.

She rose a little, staggering and blind, and weakened by the loss of blood; she crept feebly to the edge of the stream, and washed the stains from her lips, and let her face rest a little in the sweet, silent, flowing water.

Then she sat still amidst the long rush-like grass, and thought, and thought, and wondered why life

was so tough and merciless a thing, that it would ache on, and burn on, and keep misery awake to know itself even when its death-blow had been dealt, and the steel was in its side.

She was still only half sensible of her wretchedness. She was numbed by weakness, and her brain seemed deadened by a hot pain, that shot through it as with tongues of flame.

The little beetle at her feet was busied in a yellower soil than sand. He moved round and round in a little dazzling heap of coins, and trembling paper thin as gauze. She saw it without seeing for awhile; then, all at once, a knowledge flashed on her. She saw that the money had fallen from her tunic. She guessed the truth—that in his last embrace he had slid into her bosom half that sum whereof he had spoken as the ransom which had set him free.

Her bloodless face grew scarlet with an immeasurable shame. She would have suffered far less if he had killed her.

He who denied her love to give her gold !

Better that, when he had kissed her, he had covered her eyes softly with one hand, and with the other driven his knife straight through the white warmth of her breast.

The sight of the gold stung her like a snake.

Gold!—such wage as men flung to the painted harlots gibing at the corners of the streets!

The horror of the humiliation filled her with loathing of herself. Unless she had become shameful in his sight, she thought, he could not have cast this shame upon her.

She gathered herself slowly up, and stood and looked with blind aching eyes at the splendour of the sunrise.

Her heart was breaking.

Her one brief dream of gladness was severed sharply, as with a sword, and killed for ever.

She did not reason—all thought was stunned with her; but as a woman, who loves looking on the face she loves, will see sure death written there long ere any other can detect it, so she knew, by the fatal and unerring instinct of passion, that he was gone from her as utterly and as eternally as though his grave had closed on him.

She did not even in her own heart reproach him. Her love for him was too perfect to make rebuke against him possible to her. Had he not a right to go as he would, to do as he chose, to take her or leave her, as best might seem to him? Only he had no right to shame her with what he had

deemed shame to himself; no right to insult what he had slain.

She gathered herself slowly up, and took his money in her hand, and went along the river bank.

Whither?

She had no knowledge at first; but, as she moved against the white light and the cool currents of the morning air, her brain cleared a little. The purpose which had risen in her slowly matured and strengthened; without its sustenance she would have sunk down and perished, like a flower cut at the root.

Of all the world that lay beyond the pale of those golden and russet orchards and scarlet lakes of blowing poppies she had no more knowledge than the lizard at her feet.

Cities, he had often said, were as fiery furnaces that consumed all youth and innocence which touched them: for such as she to go to them was, he had often said, to cast a luscious and golden peach of the summer into the core of a wasps' nest. Nevertheless, her mind was resolute to follow him, —to follow him unknown by him; so that, if his footsteps turned to brighter paths, her shadow might never fall across his ways; but so that, if need were, if failure still pursued him, and by

failure came misery and death, she would be there beside him, to share those fatal gifts which none would dispute with her or grudge.

To follow him was to her an instinct as natural and as irresistible as it is to the dog to track his master's wanderings.

She would have starved ere ever she would have told him that she hungered. She would have perished by the roadside ere ever she would have cried to him that she was homeless. She would have been torn asunder for a meal by wolves ere she would have bought safety or succour by one coin of that gold he had slid in her bosom, like the wages of a thing that was vile.

But to follow him she never hesitated: unless this had been possible to her, she would have refused to live another hour. The love in her, at once savage and sublime, at once strong as the lion's rage and humble as the camel's endurance, made her take patiently all wrongs at his hands, but made her powerless to imagine a life in which he was not.

She went slowly now through the country, in the hush of the waking day.

He had said that he would leave at dawn.

In her unconscious agony of the night gone by, she had run far and fast ere she had fallen; and

now, upon her waking, she had found herself some league from the old mill-woods, and further yet from the tower on the river where he dwelt.

She was weak, and the way seemed very long to her ; ever and again, too, she started aside and hid herself, thinking each step were his. She wanted to give him back his gold, yet she felt as though one look of his eyes would kill her.

It was long, and the sun was high, ere she had dragged her stiff and feeble limbs through the long grasses of the shore and reached the ruined granary. Crouching down, and gazing through the spaces in the stones from which so often she had watched him, she saw at once that the place was desolate.

The great Barabbas, and the painted panels and canvases, and all the pigments and tools and articles of an artist's store, were gone ; but the figures on the walls were perforce left there to perish. The early light fell full upon them, sad and calm and pale, living their life upon the stone.

She entered and looked at them.

She loved them greatly ; it pierced her heart to leave them there—alone.

The bound Helios working at the mill, with white Hermes watching, mute and content,—Persephone crouching in the awful shadow of the

dread winged King,—the Greek youths, with doves in their breasts and golden apples in their hands,—the women dancing upon Cithæron, in the moonlight,—the young gladiator wrestling with the Libyan lion,—all the familiar shapes and stories that made the grey walls teem with the old sweet life of the heroic times, were there—left to the rat and the spider, the dust and the damp, the slow, sad death of a decay which no heart would sorrow for, nor any hand arrest.

The days would come and go, the suns would rise and set, the nights would fall, and the waters flow, and the great stars throb above in the skies, and they would be there—alone.

To her they were living things, beautiful and divine; they were bound up with all the hours of her love; and at their feet she had known the one brief dream of ecstasy that had sprung up for her, great and golden as the prophet's gourd, and as the gourd in a night had withered.

She held them in a passionate tenderness—these, the first creatures who had spoken to her with a smile, and had brought light into the darkness of her life. She flung herself on the ground and kissed its dust, and prayed for them in an agony of prayer—prayed for them that the hour might come, and

come quickly, when men would see the greatness of their maker, and would remember them, and seek them, and bear them forth in honour and in worship to the nations. She prayed in an agony; prayed blindly, and to whom she knew not; prayed, in the sightless instinct of the human heart, towards some greater strength which could bestow at once retribution and consolation.

Nor was it so much for him as for them that she thus prayed: in loving them she had reached the pure and impersonal passion of the artist. To have them live, she would have given her own life.

Then the bonds of her torment seemed to be severed; and, for the first time, she fell into a passion of tears, and, stretched there on the floor of the forsaken chamber, wept as women weep upon a grave.

When she arose, at length, she met the eyes of Hypnos and Oneiros and Thanatos—the gentle gods who give forgetfulness to men.

They were her dear gods, her best beloved and most compassionate; yet their look struck coldly to her heart.

Sleep, Dreams, and Death,—were these the only gifts with which the gods, being merciful, could answer prayer?



BOOK VI.

“Dust to Dust.”



CHAPTER I.

AT the little quay in the town many boats were lading and unlading, and many setting their sails to go southward with their loads of eggs or of birds, of flowers, of fruit or of herbage; all smelling of summer rain and the odours of freshly ploughed earths turned up with the nest of the lark and the root of the cowslip laid bare in them.

She lost herself in its little busy crowd, and learned what she needed without any asking, in turn, question of her.

Arslàn had sailed at sunrise.

There was a little boat, with an old man in it, loaded with Russian violets from a flower-farm.

The old man was angered and in trouble: the lad who steered for him had failed him, and the young men and boys on the canals were all too busied to be willing to go the voyage for the

wretched pittance he offered. She heard, and leaned towards him.

“Do you go the way to Paris?”

The old man nodded.

“I will steer for you, then,” she said to him; and leaped down amongst his fragrant freight. He was a stranger to her, and let her be. She did for him as well as another, since she said that she knew those waters well.

He was in haste, and, without more words, he loosened his sail, and cut his moor-rope, and set his little vessel adrift down the water-ways of the town, the violets filling the air with their odours and blue as the eyes of a child that wakes smiling.

All the old familiar streets, all the dusky gateways and dim passages, all the ropes on which the lanterns and the linen hung, all the wide carved stairways water-washed, all the dim windows that the women filled with pots of ivy and the song of birds,—she was drifting from them with every pulse of the tide, never again to return; but she looked at them without seeing them, indifferent, and having no memory of them; her brain, and her heart, and her soul were with the boat that she followed.

It was the day of the weekly market.

The broad flat-bottomed boats were coming in at

sunrise, in each some cargo of green food or of farm produce ; a strong girl rowing with bare arms, and the sun catching the white glint of her headgear. Boys with coils of spotted birds' eggs, children with lapsful of wood-gathered primroses, old women nursing a wicker cage of cackling hens or hissing geese, mules and asses, shaking their bells and worsted tassels, bearing their riders high on sheep-skin saddles,—these all went by her on the river, or on the towing-path, or on the broad high road that ran for a space by the water's edge.

All of these knew her well ; all of these sometime or another had jeered her, jostled her, flouted her, or fled from her. But no one stopped her. No one cared enough for her to care even to wonder where she went.

She glided out of the town, and along the banks she knew so well, and past the wood and the orchards of Yprès. But what at another time would have had pain for her, and held her with the bonds of a sad familiarity, now scarcely moved her. One great grief and one great passion had drowned all lesser woes, and scorched to ashes all slighter memories.

All day long they sailed.

At noon the old man gave her a little fruit and a

crust as part of her wage ; she tried to eat them, knowing she would want all her strength.

They left the course of the stream that she knew, and sailed further than she had ever sailed ; passed towns whose bells were ringing, and noble bridges gleaming in the sun, and water-mills black and gruesome, and bright orchards and vineyards heavy with the promise of fruit. She knew none of them. There were only the water flowing under the keel, and the blue sky above, with the rooks circling in it, which had the look of friends to her.

The twilight fell ; still the wind served, and still they held on ; the mists came, white and thick, and stars rose, and the voices from the shores sounded strangely, with here and there a note of music or the deep roll of a drum.

So she drifted out of the old life into an unknown world. But she never once looked back. Why should she ?—He had gone before.

When it was quite night, they drew near to a busy town, whose lights glittered by hundreds and thousands on the bank. There were many barges and small boats at anchor in its wharves, hanging out lanterns at their mast-heads.

The old man bade her steer his boat amongst them, and with a cord he made it fast.

"This is Paris?" she asked, breathlessly.

The old man laughed.

"Paris is days' sail away."

"I asked you if you went to Paris?"

The old man laughed again.

"I said I came the Paris way. So I have done. Land."

Her face set with an anger that made him wince, dull though his conscience was.

"You cheated me," she said, briefly; and she climbed the boat's side, and, shaking the violets off her, set her foot upon the pier, not stooping to waste more words.

But a great terror fell on her.

She had thought that the boat would bring her straight to Paris; and, once in Paris, she had thought that it would be as easy to trace his steps as it had been in the little town that she had left. She had had no sense of distance—no knowledge of the size of cities; the width, and noise, and hurry, and confusion of this one waterside town made her helpless and stupid.

She stood like a young lost dog upon the flags of the landing-place, not knowing whither to go, nor what to do.

The old man, busied in unlading his violets into

the wicker kreels of the women waiting for them, took no notice of her? He had used her so long as he had wanted her.

There were incessant turmoil, outcry, and uproar round the landing-stairs, where large cargoes of beetroot, cabbages, and fish were being put on shore. The buyers and the sellers screamed and swore; the tawny light of oil-lamps flickered over their furious faces; the people jostled her, pushed her, cursed her, for being in the way. She shrank back in bewilderment and disgust, and walked feebly away from the edge of the river, trying to think, trying to get back her old health and her old force.

The people of the streets were too occupied to take any heed of her. Only one ragged little boy danced before her a moment, shrieking, "The gipsy! the gipsy! Good little fathers, look to your pockets!"

But she was too used to the language of abuse to be moved by it. She went on, as though she were deaf, through the yelling of the children and the chattering and chaffering of the trading multitude.

There was a little street leading off the quay, picturesque and ancient, with parquettèd houses and quaint painted signs; at the corner of it sat an

old woman on a wooden stool, with a huge fan of linen on her head like a mushroom. She was selling roasted chestnuts by the glare of a little horn lantern.

By this woman she paused, and asked the way to Paris.

“Paris! This is a long way from Paris.”

“How far—to walk?”

“That depends. My boy went up there on foot last summer; he is a young fool, blotting and messing with ink and paper, while he talks of being a great man, and sups with the rats in the sewers! He, I think, was a week walking it. It is pleasant enough in fair weather. But you—you are a gipsy. Where are your people?”

“I have no people.”

She did not know even what this epithet of gipsy, which they so often cast at her, really meant. She remembered the old life of the Liébana, but she did not know what manner of life it had been; and since Phratos had left her there, no one of his tribe or of his kind had been seen in the little Norman town among the orchards.

The old woman grinned, trimming her lantern.

“If you are too bad for them, you must be bad indeed! You will do very well for Paris, no doubt.”

And she began to count her chestnuts, lest this stranger should steal any of them.

Folle-Farine took no notice of the words.

“Will you show me which is the road to take?” she asked. Meanwhile the street boy had brought three or four of his comrades to stare at her; and they were dancing round her with grotesque grimace, and singing, “Houpe là, Houpe là! Burn her for a witch!”

The woman directed her which roads to go as well as she could for the falling darkness, and she thanked the woman and went. The street-children ran at her heels like little curs, yelling and hissing foul language; but she ran too, and was swifter than they, and outstripped them, the hardy training of her limbs standing her in good service.

How far she ran, or what streets she traversed, she could not tell; the chestnut-seller had said “Leave the pole-star behind you,” and the star was shining behind her always, and she ran south steadily.

Great buildings, lighted casements, high stone walls, groups of people, troopers drinking, girls laughing, men playing dominoes in the taverns, women chattering in the coffee-houses, a line of priests going to a death-bed with the bell ringing before the Host, a line of soldiers filing through

great doors as the drums beat the return into barracks,—thousands of these pictures glowed in her path a moment, with the next to fade and give place to others. But she looked neither to the right or left, and held on straightly for the south.

Once or twice a man halloed after her, or a soldier tried to stop her. Once, going through the gateway in the southern wall, a sentinel challenged her, and levelled his bayonet only a second too late. But she eluded them all by the swiftness of her flight and the suddenness of her apparition, and she got out safe beyond the barriers of the town, and on to the road that led to the country,—a road quiet and white in the moonlight, and bordered on either side with the tall poplars and the dim, bare, reaper fields which looked to her like dear familiar friends.

It was lonely, and she sat down on a stone by the wayside and rested. She had no hesitation in what she was doing. He had gone south, and she would go likewise; that she might fail to find him there, never occurred to her. Of what a city was she had not yet any conception; her sole measurement of one was the little towns whither she had driven the mules to sell the fruits and the fowls for Flamma.

To have been cheated of Paris, and to find her-

self thus far distant from it, appalled her, and made her heart sink.

But it had no power to make her hesitate in the course she took. She had no fear and no doubt: the worst thing that could have come to her had come already; the silence and the strength of absolute despair were on her.

Besides, a certain thrill of liberty was on her. For the first time in all her life she was absolutely free, with the freedom of the will and of the body both.

She was no longer captive to one place, bond-slave to one tyranny; she was no longer driven with curses and commands, and yoked and harnessed every moment of her days. To her, with the blood of a tameless race in her, there was a certain force and elasticity in this deliverance from bondage, that lifted some measure of her great woe off her. She could not be absolutely wretched so long as the open sky was above her, and the smell of the fields about her, and on her face the breath of the blowing winds.

She had that love which is as the bezoar stone of fable—an amulet that makes all wounds unfelt, and death a thing to smile at in derision. Besides, there was in her veins a certain thrill of the sweetness of

liberty. She was no longer captive to one place, or bound in the old bonds of servitude. She was free—with the freedom of the will and of the body.

Without some strong impulsion from without, she might never have cut herself adrift from the tyranny that had held her down from childhood; and even the one happiness she had known had been but little more than the exchange of one manner of slavery for another.

But now she was free—absolutely free; and in the calm, cool night—in the dusk and the solitude, with the smell of the fields around her, and above her the stars, she knew it and was glad,—glad even amidst the woe of loneliness and the agony of abandonment.

She sat awhile by the roadside and counted his gold by the gleam of the stars, and put it away securely in her girdle, and drank from a brook beside her, and tried to eat a little of the bread which the old boat-man had given her as her wages, with three pieces of copper money.

But the crust choked her; she felt hot with fever, and her throat was parched and full of pain.

The moon was full upon her where she sat; the red and white of her dress bore a strange look; her face was colourless, and her eyes looked but

the larger and more lustrous for the black shadows beneath them, and the weary swollen droop of their lids.

She rested there, and pondered on the next step she had best take.

A woman came past her, and stopped and looked. The moonlight was strong upon her face.

"You are a handsome wench," said the wayfarer, who was elderly and of pleasant visage; "too handsome, a vast deal, to be sitting alone like one lost. What is the matter?"

"Nothing!" she answered.

The old reserve clung to her and fenced her secret in, as the prickles of a cactus hedge may fence in the magnolia's flowers of snow.

"What, then? Have you a home?"

"No."

"Eh! You must have a lover?"

Folle-Farine's lips grew whiter, and she shrank a little; but she answered, steadily:

"No."

"No! And at your age; and handsome as a ripe, red apple,—with your skin of satin, and your tangle of hair! Fie, for shame! Are the men blind? Where do you rest to-night?"

"I am going on—south."

“And mean to walk all night? Pooh! Come home with me, and sup and sleep. I live hard by, just inside the walls.”

Folle-Farine opened her great eyes wide. It was the first creature who had ever offered her hospitality. It was an old woman, too; there could be nothing but kindness in the offer, she thought; and kindness was so strange to her, that it troubled her more than did cruelty.

“You are good,” she said, gratefully,—“very good; but I cannot come.”

“Cannot come! Why, then?”

“Because I must go on to Paris; I cannot lose an hour. Nevertheless, it is good of you.”

The old woman laughed roughly.

“Oh, ho! the red apple must go to Paris. No other market grand enough! Is that it?”

“I do not know what you mean.”

“But stay with me to-night. The roads are dangerous. There are vagrants and ill-livers about. There are great fogs, too, in this district; and you will meet drunken soldiers and beggars that will rob you. Come home with me. I have a pretty little place, though poor; and you shall have such fare as I give my own daughter. And maybe you will see two or three of the young nobles. They

look in for a laugh and a song—all innocent: my girls are favourites. Come, it is not a stone's throw through the south gate."

"You are good; but I cannot come. As for the road, I am not afraid. I have a good knife, and I am strong."

She spoke in all unconsciousness, in her heart thankful to this, the first human creature that had ever offered her shelter or good nature.

The woman darted one sharp look at her, venomous as an adder's bite; then bade her a short good-night, and went on her way to the gates of the town. Folle-Farine rose up and walked on, taking her own southward road.

She was ignorant of any peril that she had escaped. She did not know that the only animals which prey upon the young of their own sex and kind are women.

She was very tired; long want of sleep, anguish, and bodily fatigue made her dull, and too exhausted to keep long upon her feet. She looked about her for some place of rest; and she knew that if she did not husband her strength, it might fail her ere she reached him, and stretch her on a sick-bed in some hospital of the poor.

She passed two or three cottages standing by the

roadside, with light gleaming through their shutters; but she did not knock at any one of them. She was afraid of spending her three copper coins; and she was too proud to seek food or lodging as an alms.

By-and-by she came to a little shed, standing where no house was. She looked in it, and saw it full of the last season's hay, dry and sweet-smelling, tenanted only by a cat rolled round in slumber.

She crept into it, and laid herself down and slept, the bright starry skies shining on her through the open space that served for entrance, the clatter of a little brook under the poplar trees the only sound upon the quiet air.

Footsteps went past twice or thrice, and once a waggon rolled lumbering by; but no one came thither to disturb her, and she sank into a fitful heavy sleep.

At daybreak she was again afoot, always on the broad road to the south-west.

With one of her coins she bought a loaf and a draught of milk, at a hamlet through which she went. She was surprised to find that people spoke to her without a curse or taunt, and dealt with her as with any other human being.

Insensibly with the change of treatment, and with the fresh sweet air, and with the brisk movement that bore her on her way, her heart grew lighter, and her old dauntless spirit rose again.

She would find him, she thought, as soon as ever she entered Paris; and she would watch over him, and only go near him if he needed her. And then, and then——.

But her thoughts went no further. She shut the future out from her; it appalled her. Only one thing was clear before her—that she would get him the greatness that he thirsted for, if any payment of her body or her soul, her life or her death, could purchase it.

A great purpose nerves the life it lives in, so that no personal terrors can assail, nor any minor woes afflict it. Hunger, thirst, fatigue, hardship, danger,—these were all in her path, and she had each in turn; but not one of them unnerved her.

To reach Paris, she felt that she would have walked through flames, or fasted forty days.

For two days and nights she went on—days cloudless, nights fine and mild; then came a day of storm—sharp hail and loud thunder. She went on through it all the same; the agony in her heart made the glare of lightning and the roar of winds

no more to her than the sigh of an April breeze over a primrose bank.

She had various fortunes on her way.

A party of tramps crossing a meadow set on her, and tried to insult her; she showed them her knife, and, with the blade bare against her throat, made them fall back, and scattered them.

A dirty and tattered group of gipsies, squatting in a dry ditch under a tarpaulin, hailed her, and wanted her to join with them and share their broken food. She eluded them with disgust; they were not like the gitanos of the Liébana, and she took them to be beggars and thieves, as, indeed, they were.

At a little wayside cabin, a girl, with a bright rosy face, spoke softly and cheerily to her, and bade her rest awhile on the bench in the porch under the vines; and brought out some white pigeons to show her; and asked her, with interest, whence she came. And she, in her fierceness and her shyness, was touched, and wondered greatly that any female thing could be thus good.

She met an old man with an organ on his back, and a monkey on his shoulder. He was old and infirm. She carried his organ for him awhile, as they went along the same road; and he was gentle and kind in return, and made the route she had to

take clear to her, and told her, with a shake of his head, that Paris would be either hell or heaven to such as she. And she, hearing, smiled a little, for the first time since she had left Yprés, and thought—heaven or hell, what would it matter which, so long as she found Arslàn ?

Of Dante she had never heard ; but the spirit of the “*questi chi mai da me non piu diviso*” dwells untaught in every great love.

Once, at night, a vagrant tried to rob her, having watched her count the gold and notes which she carried in her girdle. He dragged her to a lonely place, and snatched at the red sash, grasping the money with it ; but she was too quick for him, and beat him off in such a fashion that he slunk away limping, and told his fellows to beware of her ; for she had the spring of a cat, and the stroke of a swan’s wing.

On the whole, the world seemed better to her than it had done : the men were seldom insolent, taking warning from the look in her flashing eyes and the straight carriage of her flexile frame ; and the women more than once were kind.

Many peasants passed her on their market-mules, and many carriers’ carts and farm-waggon went by along the sunny roads.

Sometimes their drivers called to her to get up, and gave her a lift of a league or two on their piles of grass, or straw, or amongst their crates of cackling poultry, as they made their slow way between the lines of the trees, with their horses nodding heavily under the weight of their uncouth harness.

All this while she never touched the gold that he had given her. Very little food sufficed to her: she had been hardly reared; and for the little she had she worked always, on her way.

A load carried, a lost sheep fetched in, some wood hewn and stacked, a crying calf fed, a cabbage-patch dug or watered, these got her the simple fare which she fed on; and for lodging she was to none indebted, preferring to lie down by the side of the cows in their stalls, or under a stack against some little blossoming garden.

The people had no prejudice against her: she found few foes, when she had left the district that knew the story of Reine Flamma; they were, on the contrary, amused with her strange picture-like look, and awed with the sad brevity of her speech to them.

Sometimes it chanced to her to get no tasks of any sort to do, and at these times she went without food: touch his gold she would not. On the road she did what good she could; she walked

a needless league to carry home a child who had broken his leg in a lonely lane ; she sought, in a foggy night, for the straying goat of a wretched old woman ; she saved an infant from the flames in a little cabin burning in the midst of the green fields : she did what came in her path to do. For her heart was half broken ; and this was her way of prayer.

So, by tedious endeavour, she won her passage wearily towards Paris.

She had been nine days on the road, losing her way at times, and having often wearily to retrace her steps.

On the tenth day she came to a little town lying in a green hollow amidst woods.

It had an ancient church ; the old sweet bells were ringing a last midday mass ; a crumbling fortress of the Angevine kings gave it majesty and shadow ; it was full of flowers and of trees, and had quaint, quiet, grey streets, hilly and shady, that made her think of the streets round about the cathedral of her mother's birthplace, away north-westward in the white sea-mists.

When she entered it, noon had just sounded from all its many clocks and chimes. The weather was hot, and she was very tired. She had not eaten any food, save some berries and green leaves, for

more than forty hours. She had been refused anything to do in all places ; and she had no money—except that gold of his.

There was a little tavern, vine-shaded and bright with a late-flowering rose that hid its casements. She asked there, timidly, if there were any task she might do,—to fetch water, to sweep, to break wood, to drive or to stable a mule or a horse ?

They took her to be a gipsy ; they ordered her roughly to be gone.

Through the square window she could see food—a big juicy melon cut in halves, sweet yellow cakes, warm and crisp from the oven, a white chicken, cold and dressed with cresses, a jug of milk, an abundance of bread. And her hunger was very great.

Nine days of sharper privation that even that to which she had been inured in the penury of Yprés had made her cheeks hollow and her limbs fleshless ; and a continual consuming heat and pain gnawed at her chest.

She sat on a bench that was free to all wayfarers, and looked at the food in the tavern-kitchen. It tempted her with the animal ravenousness begotten by long fast. She wanted to fly at it as a starved dog flies. A rosy-faced woman cut up the chicken on a china dish, singing.

Folle-Farine, outside, looked at her, and took courage from her smiling face.

“Will you give me a little work?” she murmured. “Anything—anything—so that I may get bread.”

“You are a gipsy,” answered the woman, ceasing to smile. “Go to your own folk.”

And she would not offer her even a plate of broken victuals.

Folle-Farine rose and walked wearily away. She could not bear the sight of the food; she felt that if she looked at it longer she would spring on it like a wolf. But to use his gold never occurred to her. She would have bitten her tongue through in famine ere she would have taken one coin of it.

As she went, being weak from long hunger and the stroke of the sun-rays, she stumbled and fell. She recovered herself quickly; but in the fall the money had shaken itself from her sash, and been scattered with a ringing sound upon the stones.

The woman in the tavern-window raised a loud cry.

“Oh, *hè!* the wicked liar!—to beg bread while her waistband is stuffed with gold like a turkey with chestnuts! What a rogue to try and dupe poor honest people like us! Take her to prison.”

The woman cried loud ; there were half-a-dozen stout serving-wenches and stable-lads about in the little street, with several boys and children. Indignant at the thought of an attempted fraud upon their charity, and amazed at the flash and the fall of the money, they rushed on her with shrieks of rage and scorn, with missiles of turf and stone, with their brooms raised aloft, or their dogs set to rage at her.

She had not time to gather up the coins and notes ; she could only stand over and defend them. Two beggar-boys made a snatch at the tempting heap ; she drew her knife to daunt them with the sight of it. The people shrieked at sight of the bare blade ; a woman selling honeycomb and pots of honey at a bench under a lime-tree raised a cry that she had been robbed. It was not true ; but a street crowd always loves a lie, and never risks spoiling, by sifting, it.

The beggar-lads and the two serving-wenches and an old virago from a cottage-door near set upon her, and scrambled together to drive her away from the gold and share it. Resolute to defend it at any peril, she set her heel down on it, and, with her back against the tree, stood firm ; not striking, but with the point of the knife outward.

One of the boys, maddened to get the gold, darted forward, twisted his limbs round her, and struggled with her for its possession. In the struggle he wounded himself upon the steel. His arm bled largely; he filled the air with his shrieks; the people, furious, accused her of his murder.

Before five minutes had gone by she was seized, overpowered by numbers, cuffed, kicked, upbraided with every name of infamy, and dragged as a criminal up the little steep stony street in the blaze of the noonday sun, whilst on each side the townsfolk looked out from their doorways and their balconies and cried out :

“What is it? Oh, hè! A brawling gipsy, who has stolen something, and has stabbed poor little Fréki, the blind man’s son, because he found her out? *Au violon!—au violon!* What is it?”

To which the groups called back again, “Yes. A thief of a gipsy, begging alms while she had stolen gold on her. She has stabbed poor little Fréki, the blind cobbler’s grandson: yes; we think he is dead.”

And the people above, in horror, lifted their hands and eyes, and shouted afresh, “*Au violon!—au violon!*”

Meanwhile the honey-seller ran beside them,

crying aloud that she had been robbed of five broad golden pieces.

It was a little sunny country-place, very green with trees and grass, filled usually with few louder sounds than the cackling of geese and the dripping of the well-water.

But its stones were sharp and rough; its voices were shrill and fierce; its gossips were cruel and false of tongue; its justice was very small, and its credulity was measureless. A girl, bare-foot and bare-headed, with eyes of the East, and a knife in her girdle, teeth that met in their youngsters' wrist, and gold pieces that scattered like dust from her bosom,—such an one could have no possible innocence in their eyes, such an one was condemned so soon as she was looked at when she was dragged amongst them up their hilly central way.

She had had money on her, and she had asked for food on the plea of being starved; that was fraud plain enough, even for those who were free to admit that the seller of the honey-pots had never been over-true of speech, and had never owned so much as five gold pieces ever since her first bees had sucked their first spray of heath-bells.

No one had any mercy on a creature who had

money, and yet asked for work; as to her guilt, there could be no question.

She was hurried before the village tribune, and cast into the cell where all accused waited their judgment.

It was a dusky, loathsome place, dripping with damp, half underground, strongly grilled with iron, and smelling foully from the brandy and strong smoke of two drunkards who had been its occupants the previous night.

There they left her, taking away her knife and her money.

She did not resist. It was not her nature to rebel futilely; and they had fallen on her six to one, and had bound her safely with cords ere they had dragged her away to punishment.

The little den was visible to the highway through a square low grating. Through this they came and stared, and mouthed, and mocked, and taunted, and danced before her. To bait a gipsy was fair pastime.

Everywhere, from door to door, the blind cobbler, with his little son, and the woman who sold honey told their tale,—how she had stabbed the little lad and stolen the gold that the brave bees had brought their mistress, and begged for food when she had had money enough on her to buy a rich man's

feast. It was a tale to enlist against her all the hardest animosities of the poor. The village rose against her in all its little homes as though she had borne fire and sword into its midst.

If the arm of the law had not guarded the entrance of her prison-cell, the women would have stoned her to death, or dragged her out to drown in the pond:—she was worse than a murderess in their sight; and one weak man, thinking to shelter her a little from their rage, quoted against her her darkest crime when he pleaded for mercy for her because she was young and was so handsome.

The long hot day of torment passed slowly by.

Outside there were cool woods, flower-filled paths, broad fields of grass, children tossing blow-balls down the wind, lovers counting the leaves of yellow-eyed autumn daisies; but within there were only foul smells, intense nausea, cruel heats, the stings of a thousand insects, the buzz of a hundred carrion-flies, muddy water, and black mouldy bread.

She held her silence. She would not let her enemies see that they hurt her.

When the day had gone down, and the people had tired of their sport and left her a little while, an old feeble man stole timidly to her, glancing round lest any should see his charity and quote it

as a crime, and tendered her through the bars with a gentle hand a little ripe autumnal fruit upon a cool green leaf.

The kindness made the tears start to eyes too proud to weep for pain.

She took the grapes and thanked him lovingly and thankfully; cooled her aching, burning, dust-drenched throat with their fragrant moisture.

"Hush! it is nothing," he whispered, frightenedly, glancing over his shoulder lest any should see. "But tell me—tell me—why did you say you starved when you had all that gold?"

"I did starve," she answered him.

"But why—with all that gold?"

"It was another's."

The old man stared at her, trembling and amazed.

"What—what! die of hunger and keep your hands off money in your girdle?"

A dreary smile came on her face.

"What! is that inhuman too?"

"Inhuman?" he murmured. "Oh, child—oh, child, tell any tale you will, save such a tale as that."

And he stole away sorrowful, because sure that for his fruit of charity she had given him back a lie.

He shambled away, afraid that his neighbours should see the little thing which he had done.

She was left alone.

It began to grow dark. She felt scorched with fever, and her head throbbed. Long hunger, intense fatigue, and all the agony of thought in which she had struggled on her way, had their reaction on her. She shivered where she sat on the damp straw which they had cast upon the stones; and strange noises sang in her ears, and strange lights glimmered and flashed before her eyes. She did not know what ailed her.

The dogs came and smelt at her, and one little early robin sang a twilight song in an elder-bush near. These were the only things that had any pity on her.

By-and-by, when it was quite night, they opened the grated door and thrust in another captive, a vagrant whom they had found drunk or delirious on the high road, and whom they locked up for the night, that on the morrow they might determine what to do with him.

He threw himself heavily forward as he was pushed in by the old soldier whose place it was to guard the miserable den.

She shrank away into the furthest corner of the

den, and crouched there, breathing heavily, and staring with dull, dilated eyes.

She thought—surely they could not mean to leave them there alone, all the night through, in the horrible darkness?

The slamming of the iron door answered her; and the old soldier, as he turned the rusty key in the lock, grumbled that the world was surely at a pretty pass, when two tramps became too coy to roost together. And he stumbled up the ladder-like stairs of the guard-house to his own little chamber; and there, smoking and drinking, and playing dominoes with a comrade, dismissed his prisoners from his recollection.

Meanwhile, the man whom he had thrust into the cell was stretched where he had fallen, drunk or insensible, and moaning heavily.

She, crouching against the wall, as though praying the stones to yield and hold her, gazed at him with horror and pity that together strove in the confusion of her dizzy brain, and made her dully wonder whether she were wicked thus to shrink in loathing from a creature in distress so like her own.

The bright moon rose on the other side of the trees beyond the grating; it fell across the figure of the vagrant whom they had locked in with her, as

in the wild-beast shows of old they locked a lion with an antelope in the same cage—out of sport.

She saw the looming massive shadow of an immense form, couched-like a couching beast; she saw the fire of burning, wide-open, sullen eyes; she saw the restless, feeble gesture of two lean hands, that clutched at the barren stones with the futile action of a chained vulture clutching at his rock; she saw that the man suffered horribly, and she tried to pity him—tried not to shrink from him—tried to tell herself that he might be as guiltless as was herself. But she could not prevail: nature, instinct, youth, sex, sickness, exhaustion, all conquered her, and broke her strength. She recoiled from the unbearable loathsomeness of such association; she sprang to the grated aperture, and seized the iron in her hands, and shook it with all her might, and tore at it, and bruised her chest and arms against it, and clung to it convulsively, shriek after shriek pealing from her lips.

No one heard, or no one answered to her prayer.

A stray dog came and howled in unison; the moon sailed on behind the trees; the old soldier above slept over his toss of brandy; at the only dwelling near they were dancing at a bridal, and had no ear to hear.

The passionate outcries wailed themselves to silence on her trembling mouth; her strained hands gave way from their hold on the irons; she grew silent from sheer exhaustion, and dropped in a heap at the foot of the iron door, clinging to it, and crushed against it, and turning her face to the night without, feeling some little sense of solace in the calm, clear moon;—some little sense of comfort in the near presence of the dog.

Meanwhile the dusky prostrate form of the man had not stirred. He had not spoken, save to curse heaven and earth and every living thing. He had not ceased to glare at her with eyes that had the red light of a tiger's in their pain.

He was a man of superb stature and frame; he was worn by disease and delirium, but he had in him a wild, leonine, tawny beauty still. His clothes were of rags, and his whole look was of wretchedness; yet there was about him a certain reckless majesty and splendour still, as the scattered beams of the white moonlight broke themselves upon him.

Of a sudden he spoke aloud, with a glitter of terrible laughter on his white teeth and his flashing eyes. He was delirious, and had no consciousness of where he was.

“The fourth bull I had killed that Easter day.

Look ! do you see ? It was a red Andalusian. He lamed three picadors, and ripped the bellies of eight horses,—a brave bull, but I was one too many for him. She was there. All the winter she had flouted over and taunted me ; all the winter she had cast her scorn at me—the beautiful brown thing, with her cruel eyes. But she was there when I slew the great red bull—straight above there, looking over her fan. Do you see ? And when my sword went up to the hilt in his throat, and the brave blood spouted, she laughed such a little sweet laugh, and cast her yellow jessamine flower at me, down in the blood and the sand there. And that night the red bull died, the rope was thrown from the balcony ! So—so ! Only a summer ago ; only a summer ago !” Then he laughed loud again ; and, laughing, sang—

“ Avez-vous vu en Barcelonne
Une belle dame, au sein bruni,
Pâle comme un beau soir d'automne ?
C'est ma maîtresse, ma lionne,
La Marchesa d'Amagüi.”

The rich loud challenge of the love-song snapped short in two. With a groan and a curse he flung himself on the mud floor, and clutched at it with his empty hands.

“Wine!—wine!” he moaned, lying athirst there as the red bull had lain on the sands of the circus; longing for the purple draughts of his old feast-nights, as the red bull had longed for the mountain streams, so cold and strong, of its own Andalusian birthplace.

Then he laughed again, and sang old songs of Spain, broken and marred by discord—their majestic melodies wedded strangely to many a stave of lewd riot and of amorous verse.

Then for awhile he was quiet, moaning dully, staring upward at the white face of the moon.

After a while he mocked it—the cold, chaste thing that was the meek trickster of so many mole-eyed lords.

Through the terror and the confusion of her mind, with the sonorous melody of the tongue, with the flaming darkness of the eyes, with the wild barbaric dissolute grandeur of this shattered manhood, vague memories floated, distorted and intangible, before her.

Of deep forests whose shade was cool even in midsummer and midday; of glancing torrents rushing through their beds of stone; of mountain snows flushing in sunset to all the hues of the mountain roses that grew by millions by the river-water; of wondrous

nights sultry and serene, in which women with flashing glances and bare breasts danced with their spangled anklets glittering in the rays of the moon ; of roofless palaces where the Crescent still glistened amidst the colours of the walls ; of marble courts where only the oleander kept pomp and the wild fig-vine held possession ; of a dead nation which at midnight thronged through the tombs of its kings and passed in shadowy hosts through the fated land which had rejected the faith and the empire of Islam ; sowing as they went upon the blood-soaked soil of Spain the vengeance of the dead in pestilence, in anarchy, in barren passions, in endless riot and revolt, so that no sovereign should ever sit in peace on the ruined throne of the Moslem, and no light shine ever again upon the people whose boast it once had been that on them the sun in heaven never set : —all these memories floated before her, and only served to make her fear more ghastly, her horror more unearthly.

There he lay delirious—a madman chained there at her feet, so close in the little den, that, shrink as she would against the wall, she could barely keep from the touch of his hands as they were flung forth in the air, from the scorch of his breath as he raved and cursed.

And there was no light except the fire in his eyes; except the flicker of the moonbeam through the leaves.

She spent her strength in piteous shrieks. They were the first cries that had ever broken from her lips for human aid; and they were vain. The guard above slept heavy with brandy and a dotard's dreams. The village was not aroused. What cared any of its sleepers how these outcasts fared?

She crouched in the farthest corner, when her voice had spent itself in the passion of appeal.

The night—would it ever end?

Beside its horror, all the wretchedness and bondage of her old life seemed like peace and freedom.

Writhing in his pain and frenzy, the wounded drunkard struck her—all unconscious of the blow—across her eyes, and fell, contorted and senseless, with his head upon her knees.

He had ceased to shout his amorous songs, and vaunt his lustful triumphs. His voice was hollow in his throat, and babbled with a strange sound, low and fast and inarticulate.

“In the little green wood—in the little green wood,” he muttered. “Hark! do you hear the mill-water run? She looked so white and so cold; and they all called her a saint. What could a man

do but kill *that*? Does she cry out against me? You say so? You lie. You lie—be you devil or god. You sit on a great white throne and judge us all. So they say. You can send us to hell? Well, do. You shall never wring a word from her to *my* hurt. She thinks I killed the child? Nay—that I swear. Phratos knew, I *think*. But he is dead;—so they say. Ask him. . . . My brown queen, who saw me kill the red bull,—are you there too? Aye. How the white jewels shine in your breast! Stoop a little, and kiss me. So! Your mouth burns; and the yellow jessamine flower—there is a snake in it. Look! You love me?—oh-ho!—what does your priest say, and your lord? Love!—so many of you swore that. But she,—she, standing next to her god there,—I hurt her most, and yet she alone of you all says nothing!”

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When, at daylight, the people unbarred the prison-door, they found the sightless face of the dead man lying full in the light of the sun: beside him the girl crouched with a senseless stare in the horror of her eyes, and on her lips a ghastly laugh.

For Folle-Farine had entered at length into her Father's kingdom.



CHAPTER II.

FOR many months she knew nothing of the flight of time. All she was conscious of were burning intolerable pain, continual thirst, and the presence as of an iron hand upon her head, weighing down the imprisoned brain. All she saw in the horrible darkness, which no ray of light ever broke, was the face of Thanatos, with the white rose pressed against his mouth, to whom endlessly she stretched her arms in vain entreaty, but who said only, with the passionless pity of his gaze, "I come in my own time, and neither tarry nor hasten for any supplication of a mortal creature."

She lived, as a reed torn up from the root may live, by the winds that waft it, by the birds that carry it, by the sands that draw its fibres down into themselves, to root afresh whether it will or no.

“The reed was worthy to die!—the reed was worthy to die!” was all that she said, again and again, lying staring with her hot distended eyes into the void as of perpetual night, which was all that she saw around her. The words were to those who heard her, however, the mere meaningless babble of madness.

When they had found her in the cell of the guardhouse, she was far beyond any reach of harm from them, or any sensibility of the worst which they might do to her. She was in a delirious stupor, which left her no more sense of place, or sound, or time than if her brain had been drugged to the agonies and ecstasies of the opium-eater.

They found her homeless, friendless, nameless; a thing accursed, destitute, unknown; as useless and as rootless as the dead Spanish vagrant lying on the stones beside her. They cast him to the public ditch; they sent her to the public sick wards, a league away; an ancient palace, whose innumerable chambers and whose vast corridors had been given to a sisterhood of mercy, and employed for nigh a century as a public hospital.

In this prison she lay without any sense of the passing of hours and days and months.

The accusation against her fell to the ground

harmless ; no one pursued it : the gold was gone—somewhere, nowhere. No one knew, unless it were the bee-wife, and she held her peace.

She was borne, senseless, to the old hospice in the great, dull, saintly, historic town, and there perished from all memories as all time perished to her.

Once or twice the sister of charity who had the charge of her sought to exorcise the demon tormenting this stricken brain and burning body, by thrusting into the hands that clenched the air a leaden image or a cross of sacred wood. But those heathen hands, even in delirium, threw those emblems away always, and the captive would mutter in a vague incoherence that froze the blood of her hearers :

“The old gods are not dead ; they only wait—they only wait ! I am theirs—theirs ! They forget, perhaps. But I remember. I keep my faith ; they must keep theirs, for shame’s sake. Heaven or hell ? what does it matter ? Can it matter to me, so that he has his desire ? And that they must give, or break faith, as men do. Persephone ate the pomegranate,—you know—and she went back to hell. So will I—if they will it. What can it matter how the reed dies ?—by fire, by steel, by

storm?—what matter, so that the earth hear the music? Ah, God! the reed was found worthy to die! And I—I am too vile, too poor, too shameful even for *that*!”

And then her voice would rise in a passion of hysteric weeping, or sink away into the feeble wailing of the brain, mortally stricken and yet dimly sensible of its own madness and weakness; and all through the hours she, in her unconsciousness, would lament for this—for this alone—that the gods had not deemed her worthy of the stroke of death by which, through her, a divine melody might have arisen, and saved the world.

For the fable—which had grown to hold the place of so implicit a faith to her—was in her delirium always present with her; and she had retained no sense of herself except as the bruised and trampled reed which man and the gods alike had rejected as unworthy of sacrifice.

All the late autumn and the early winter came and went; and the cloud was dark upon her mind, and the pain of the blow dealt to her by Taric's hand gnawed at her brain.

When the winter turned, the darkness in which her reason had been engulfed began to clear, little by little.

As the first small trill of the wren stirred the silence in the old elm boughs; as the first feeble gleam of the new year sunshine struggled through the matted branches of the yews; as the first frail blossom of the pale hepatica timidly peeped forth in the damp moss-grown walls without, so consciousness slowly returned to her. She was so young; the youth in her refused to be quenched, and recovered its hold upon life as did the song of the birds, the light in the skies, the corn in the seed-sown earth.

She awakened to strength, to health, to knowledge; though she awoke thus blinded and confused and capable of little save the sense of some loathsome bondage, of some irreparable loss, of some great duty which she had left undone, of some great errand to which she had been summoned, and found wanting.

She saw four close stone walls around her; she saw her wrists and her ankles bound; she saw a hole high up above her head, braced with iron bars, which served to let in the few pallid streaks of daylight which alone ever found their way thither; she saw a black cross in one corner, and before it two women in black, who prayed.

She tried to rise and could not; being fettered.

She tore at the rope on her wrists with her teeth like a young tigress at her chains.

They essayed to soothe her, but in vain; they then made trial first of threats, then of coercion; neither affected her; she bit at the knotted cords with her white strong teeth, and being unable to free herself fell backward in a savage despair, glaring in mute impotent rage upon her keepers.

"I must go to Paris," she muttered again and again. "I must go to Paris."

So much escaped her;—but her secret she was still strong to keep buried in silence in her heart, as she had still kept it even in her madness.

Her old strength, her old patience, her old ferocity and stubbornness and habits of mute resistance had revived in her with the return of life and reason. Slowly she remembered all things, —remembered that she had been accused and hunted down as a thief and brought thither into this prison, as she deemed it, where the closeness of the walls pent her in and shut out the clouds and the stars, the water and the moonrise, the flicker of the green leaves against the gold of sunset, and all the liberty and loveliness of earth and air for which she was devoured by a continual thirst

of longing, like the thirst of the caged lark for the fair heights of heaven.

So when they spoke of their god, she answered always as the lark answers when his gaolers speak to him of song ;—"Set me free."

But they thought this madness no less, and kept her bound there in the little dark stone den where no sound ever reached, unless it were the wailing of a bell, and no glimpse of the sky or the trees could ever come to charm to peaceful rest her aching eyes.

At length they grew afraid of what they did. She refused all food ; she turned her face to the wall ; she stretched herself on her bed of straw motionless and rigid. The confinement, the absence of air, were a living death to the creature whose lungs were stifled unless they drank in the fresh cool draught of winds blowing unchecked over the width of the fields and forests, and whose eyes ached and grew blind unless they could gaze into the depths of free-flowing water, or feed themselves in far-reaching sight upon the radiant skies.

The errant passions in her, the inborn instincts towards perpetual liberty, and the life of the desert and of the mountains which came with the blood of the Zingari, made her prison-house a torture to her

such as is unknown to the house-born and hearth-fettered races.

If this wild moorbird died of self-imposed famine rather than live only to beat its cut wings against the four walls of their pent prison-house, it might turn ill for themselves ; so the religious community meditated. They became afraid of their own work.

One day they said to her:

“Eat and live, and you will be set free to-morrow.”

She turned for the first time and lifted her face from the straw in which she buried it, and looked them in the eyes.

“Is that true?” she asked.

“Ay,” they answered her. “We swear it by the cross of our blessed Master.”

“If a Christian swear it,—it must be a lie,” she said, with the smile that froze their timid blood.

But she accepted the food and the drink which they brought her, and broke her fast, and slept through many hours ; strengthened, as by strong wine, by that one hope of freedom beneath the wide pure skies.

She asked them on awakening what the season of the year was then. They told her it was the early spring.

“The spring,” she echoed dully,—all the months were a blank to her, which had rolled by since that red autumn evening when in the cell of the guard-house the voice of Taric had chaunted in drink and delirium the passion songs of Spain.

“Yes. It is spring,” they said again; and one sister younger and gentler than the rest, reached from its place above the crucifix the bough of the golden catkins of the willow, which served them at their holy season as an emblem of the palms of Palestine.

She looked at the drooping grace of the branches, with their buds of amber, long and in silence; then with a passion of weeping she turned her face from them as from the presence of some intolerable memory.

All down the shore of the river, amongst the silver of the reeds, the willows had been in blossom when she had first looked upon the face of Arslàn.

“Stay with us,” the women murmured, drawn to her by the humanity of those, the first, tears that she had ever shed in her imprisonment. “Stay with us; and it shall go hard if we cannot find a means to bring you to eternal peace.”

She shook her head wearily.

“It is not peace that I seek,” she murmured.

Peace ?

He would care nothing for peace on earth or in heaven, she knew. What she had sought to gain for him—what she would seek still when once she should get free—was the eternal conflict of a great fame in the world of men. Since this was the only fate which in his sight had any grace or any glory in it.

They kept their faith with her. They opened the doors of her prison-house and bade her depart in peace, pagan and criminal though they deemed her.

She reeled a little dizzily as the first blaze of the full daylight fell on her. She walked out with unsteady steps into the open air where they took her, and felt it cool and fresh upon her cheek, and saw the blue sky above her.

The gates which they unbarred were those at the back of the hospital, where the country stretched around. They did not care that she should be seen by the people of the streets.

She was left alone on a road outside the great building that had been her prison-house ; the road was full of light, it was straight and shadowless ; there was a tall tree near her full of leaf ; there was a little bird fluttering in the sand at her

feet; the ground was wet, and sparkled with rain drops.

All the little things came to her like the notes of a song heard far away — far away — in another world. They were all so familiar, yet so strange.

There was a little yellow flower growing in a tuft of grasses straight in front of her; a little wayside weed; a root and blossom of the field-born celandine.

She fell on her knees in the dust by it, and laughed and wept, and quivering, kissed it and blessed it that it grew there. It was the first thing of summer and of sunshine that she had seen so long.

A man in the gateway saw her and shook her, and bade her get from the ground.

“You are fitter to go back again,” he muttered; “you are mad, still, I think.”

Like a hunted animal she stumbled to her feet and fled from him; winged by the one ghastly terror that they would claim her and chain her back again.

They had said that she was free: but what were words? They had taken her once; they might take her twice.

She ran, and ran, and ran.

The intense fear that possessed her lent her irresistible force. She coursed the earth with the swiftness of a hare. She took no heed whence she went; she only knew that she fled from the one unutterable horror of that place. She thought that they were right; that she was mad.

It was a level green silent country which was round her, with little loveliness and little colour; but as she went she laughed incessantly in the delirious gladness of her liberty.

She tossed her head back to watch the flight of a single swallow; she caught a handful of green leaves and buried her face in them. She listened in a very agony of memory to the rippling moisture of a little brook. She followed with her eyes the sweeping vapours of the rain-clouds, and when a west wind rose and blew a cluster of loose apple blossoms between her eyes—she could no longer bear the passionate pain of all the long-lost sweetness, but flinging herself downward, sobbed with the ecstasy of an exile's memories.

The hell in which she had dwelt had denied them to her for so long.

“Ah God!” she thought, “I know now—one cannot be utterly wretched whilst one has still the air and the light and the winds of the sky.”

And she arose, calmer, and went on her way; wondering, even in that hour, why men and women trod the daily measures of their lives with their eyes downward and their ears choked with the dust; hearkening so little to the sound of the breeze in the grasses, looking so little to the passage of the clouds against the sun.

When the first blindness and rapture of her liberty had a little passed away, and abated in violence, she stood in the midst of the green fields and the fresh woods, a strange, sad, lonely figure of absolute desolation.

Her clothes were in rags; her red girdle had been changed by weather to a dusky purple; her thick clustering hair had been cut to her throat; her radiant hues were blanched, and her immense eyes gazed wofully from beneath their heavy dreamy lids, like the eyes of an antelope whom men vainly starve in the attempt to tame.

She knew neither where to go nor what to do. She had not a coin nor a crust upon her. She could not tell where she then stood, nor where the only home that she had ever known might lie.

She had not a friend on earth; and she was seventeen years old, and was beautiful and was a woman.

She stood and looked ; she did not weep ; she did not pray ; her heart seemed frozen in her. She had the gift she had craved ;—and how could she use it ?

The light was obscured by clouds, great sweet rain clouds which came trooping from the west. Woods were all round, and close against her were low brown cattle, cropping clovered grass. Away on the horizon was a vague, vast, golden cloud, like a million threads of gossamer glowing in the sun.

She did not know what it was ; yet it drew her eyes to it.

A herdsman came by her to the cattle. She pointed to the cloud.

“What is that light ?” she asked him.

The cowherd stared and laughed.

“That light ? It is only the sun shining on the domes and the spires of Paris.”

“Paris !”

She echoed the name with a great sob, and crossed her hands upon her breast, and in her way thanked God.

She had had no thought that she could be thus near to it.

She asked no more, but set straight on her way thither. It looked quite close.

She had exhausted the scanty strength which she owned in her first flight ; she could go but slowly ; and the roads were heavy across the ploughed lands, and through the edges of the woods. She walked on and on till it grew dusk, then she asked of a woman weeding in a field how far it might be yet to Paris.

The woman told her four leagues and more.

She grew deadly cold with fear. She was weak, and she had no hope that she could reach it before dawn ; and she had nothing with which to buy shelter for the night. She could see it still ; a cloud, now as of fireflies, upon the purple and black of the night ; and in a passionate agony of longing she once more bent her limbs and ran—thinking of him.

To her the city of the world, the city of the kings, the city of the eagles, was only of value for the sake of this one life it held.

It was useless. All the strength she possessed was already spent. The feebleness of fever still sang in her ears and trembled in her blood. She was sick and faint, and very thirsty.

She struck timidly at a little cottage door, and asked to rest the night there.

The woman glanced at her and slammed-to the

door. At another and yet another she tried ; but at neither had she any welcome ; they muttered of the hospitals and drove her onward. Finally, tired out, she dropped down on the curled hollow of an old oak stump that stood by the wayside, and fell asleep, seeing to the last through her sinking lids that cloud of light where the great city lay.

The night was cold ; the earth damp ; it was far on into night ; she stretched her limbs out wearily and sighed, and dreamed that Thanatos touched her with his asphodels, and whispered, "Come."





CHAPTER III.

WHEN she awoke she was no longer in the open air by the roadside, with the grey of the falling night about her, and the wet leaves for her bed. She was in a wide painted chamber, sweet with many roses, hung with deep hues of violet, filled with gold and colour and sculpture and bronze, duskily beautiful and dimly lighted by a great wood fire that glowed upon andirons of brass.

On the wall nearest her hung all alone a picture, —a picture of a girl asleep in a scarlet blaze of poppies, above her head a purple butterfly, and on her breast the Red Mouse of the Brocken.

Opposite to it beside the hearth, watching her with his small brilliant eyes, and quite motionless, sat the old man Sartorian, who had kept his faith with her, though the gods had not kept theirs.

And the picture and the reality grew confused before her, and she knew not which was herself and which her painted likeness, nor which was the little red mouse that gibbered among the red flowers, and which the little old man who sat watching her with the fire gleams bright in his eyes; and it seemed to her that she and the picture were one, and he and the mouse were one likewise; and she moaned and leaned her head on her hands and tried to think.

The heat of the chamber and the strong nourishment which they had poured down her throat when she was insensible of anything they did to her, had revived the life in her. Memory and sense returned slowly to her; what first awakened was her one passionate desire, so intense that it became an instinct stifling every other, to go on her way to the city that had flashed in its golden glory on her sight one moment, only the next to disappear into the eternal night.

“Paris!” she muttered mechanically, as she lifted her face with a hopeless bewildered prayer.

“Tell me the way to Paris,” she muttered instinctively, and she tried to rise and walk, not well knowing what she did.

The old man laughed a little silently.

“Ah-h-h. Women are the only peaches that roll of their own accord from the wall to the wasp’s nest !”

At the sound of his voice her eyes opened wide upon him ; she knew his face again.

“Where am I ?” she asked him with a sharp terror in her voice.

“In my house,” he said simply. “I drove by you when you lay on the roadside. I recognised you. When people dream of immortality they generally die in a ditch. You would have died of a single night out there. I sent my people for you. You did not wake. You have slept here five hours.”

“Is this Rioz ?” She could not comprehend, a horror seized her lest she should have strayed from Paris back into her mother’s province.

“No. It is another home of mine ; smaller, but choicer may be. Who has cut your hair close ?”

She shuddered and turned paler with the memory of that ghastly prison-house.

“Well ; I am not sure but that you are handsomer,—almost. A sculptor would like you more now,—what a head you would make for an Anteros, or an Icarus, or a Hyacinthus. Yes—you are best so. You have been ill ?”

She could not answer; she only stared at him blankly, with sad, mindless, dilated eyes.

“A little gold,” she muttered; “a little gold.”

He looked at her awhile, then rose and went and sent his handwomen, who took her to an inner chamber, and bathed and attended her with assiduous care; she was stupified and knew not what they did.

They served her tenderly. They bathed her tired limbs and laid her as gently as though she were some wounded royal captive upon a couch of down.

She had no force to resist. Her eyes were heavy, and her senses were obscured. The potency of the draught which they had forced through her lips, when she had been insensible, acted on her as an anodyne. She sank back unconsciously, and she slept again, all through the night and half the day that followed.

Through all the hours she was conscious at intervals of the fragrance of flowers, of the gleams of silver and gold, of the sounds of distant music, of the white calm gaze of marble fauns and dryads, who looked on her from amidst the coolness of hanging foliage. She who had never rested on any softer couch than her truss of hay or heap of bracken, dreamed that she slept on roses. The fragrance

of innumerable flowers breathed all around her. A distant music came through the silence on her drowsy ear. For the first time in her life of toil and pain she knew how exquisite a pleasure mere repose can be.

At noon she awoke, crying aloud that the Red Mouse claimed her soul from Thanatos.

When her vision cleared, and her dream passed away, the music, the flowers, the colour, the coolness, were all real around her. She was lying on a couch as soft as the rose-beds of Sybaris. About her were the luxuries and the graces amidst which the rich dwell. Above her head, from a golden height, a painted Eros smiled.

The light, on to which her startled eyes opened, came to her veiled through soft, rosy hues; the blossom of flowers met her everywhere, gilded lattices and precious stones, and countless things for which she knew neither the name nor use, and wondrous plants, with birds like living blossoms on the wing above them, and the marble heads of women, rising cold and pure above the dreamy shadows—all the colour, and the charm, and the silence, and the grace of the life that is rounded by wealth was around her.

She lay silent and breathless awhile, with wide

open eyes, motionless from the languor of her weakness and the confusion of her thoughts, wondering dully, whether she belonged to the hosts of the living or the dead. She was in a small sleeping chamber, in a bed like the cup of a lotus ; there was perfect silence round her, except for the faint far-off echo of some music ; a drowsy subtle fragrance filled the air, the solemn measure of a clock's pendulum deepened the sense of stillness ; for the first time in her life she learned how voluptuous a thing the enjoyment of simple rest can be. All her senses were steeped in it, lulled by it, magnetised by it ; and, so far as every thought was conscious to her, she thought that this was death—death amidst the fields of asphodel, and in the eternal peace of the realm of Thanatos.

Suddenly her eyes fell on a familiar thing, a little picture close at hand, the picture of herself amidst the poppies.

She leapt from her bed and fell before it, and clasped it in her arms, and wept over it and kissed it, because it had been the work of his hand, and prayed to the unknown gods to make her suffer all things in his stead, and to give him the desire of his soul. And the Red Mouse had no power on her, because of her great love.

She arose from that prayer with her mind clear, and her nerves strung; she remembered all that had chanced to her.

“Where are my clothes?” she muttered to the serving-women who watched beside her. “It is broad day;—I must go on;—to Paris.”

They craved her to wear the costly and brodered stuffs strewn around her; masterpieces of many an eastern and southern loom; but she put them all aside in derision and impatience, drawing around her with a proud loving action the folds of her own poor garments. Weather-stained, torn by bush and briar, soaked with night dew, and discoloured by the dye of many a crushed flower and bruised berry of the fields and woods, she yet would not have exchanged these poor shreds of woven flax and goats’ wool against imperial robes, for poor though they were, they were the symbols of her independence and her liberty.

The women tended her gently, and pressed on her many rare and fair things, but she would not have them; she took a cup of milk, and passed out into the larger chamber.

She was troubled and bewildered, but she had no fear; for she was too innocent, too wearied, and too desperate with that deathless courage, which

having borne the worst that fate can do, can know no dread.

She stood with her arms folded on her breast, drawing together the tattered folds of the tunic, gazing at the luxury, and the blended colour of the room. So softly, that she never heard his footfall, the old man entered behind her, and came to the hearth, and looked on her.

“You are better?” he asked. “Are you better, Folle-Farine?”

She looked up, and met the eyes of Sartorian. They smiled again on her with the smile of the Red Mouse.

The one passion which consumed her was stronger than any fear or any other memory: she only thought——this man must know?

She sprang forward and grasped his arm with both hands, with the seizure of a tigress; her passionate eyes searched his face; her voice came hard and fast.

“What have you done?—is he living or dead?—you must know?”

His eyes still smiled:

“I gave him his golden key;—how he should use it, that was not in our bond. But, truly, I will make another bond with you any day, Folle-Farine.”

She shuddered, and her hands dropped from their hold.

“You know nothing?” she murmured.

“Of your Norse-god? nay, nothing. An eagle soars too high for a man’s sight to follow, you know—oftentimes.”

And he laughed his little soft laugh.

The eagles often soared so high—so high—that the icy vapours of the empyrean froze them dead, and they dropped to earth a mere bruised, helpless, useless mass:—he knew.

She stood stunned and confused: her horror of Sartorian was struggling into life through the haze in which all things of the past were still shrouded to her dulled remembrance—all things, save her love.

“Rest awhile,” he said, gently. “Rest; and we may—who knows?—learn something of your northern god. First; tell me of yourself. I have sought for tidings of you vainly.”

Her eyes glanced round her on every side.

“Let me go,” she muttered.

“Nay—a moment yet. You are not well.”

“I am well.”

“Indeed? Then wait a moment.”

She rested where he motioned; he looked at her in smiling wonder.

She leaned on one of the cushioned couches, calm, motionless, negligent, giving no sign that she saw the chamber round her to be any other than the wooden barn or thatched cattle-sheds of the old mill-house; her feet were crossed, her limbs were folded in that exquisite repose which is inborn in races of the East; the warmth of the room, and the long hours of sleep had brought the natural bloom to her face, the natural lustre to her eyes, which earlier fatigue and long illness had banished.

He surveyed her with that smile which she had resented on the day when she had besought pity of him for Arslàn's sake.

"Do you not eat?" was all he said.

"Not here."

He laughed, his low humorous laugh that displeased her so bitterly, though it was soft of tone.

"And all those silks, and stuffs, and laces—do they please you no better?"

"They are not mine."

"Pooh! do you not know yet? A female thing, as beautiful as you are, makes hers everything she looks upon?"

"That is a fine phrase."

"And an empty one you think. On my soul!

no. Everything you see here is yours, if it please you."

She looked at him with dreaming perplexed eyes.

"What do you want of me?" she said, suddenly.

"Nay—why ask? All men are glad to give to women with such a face as yours."

She laughed a little; with the warmth, the rest, the wonder, the vague sense of some unknown danger, her old skill and courage rose. She knew that she had promised to be grateful always to this man: otherwise,—oh, God!—how she could have hated him, she thought!

"Why?" she answered, "why? Oh, only this: when I bought a measure of pears for Flamma in the market-place, the seller of them would sometimes pick me out a big yellow bon-chrétien, soft as butter, sweet as sugar, and offer it to me for myself. Well, when he did that, I always knew that the weight was short, or the fruit rotten. This is a wonderful pear you would give me; but is your measure false?"

He looked at her with a curious wonder and admiration; he was angered, humbled, incensed, and allured, and yet he was glad; she looked so handsome thus with the curl on her quiet lips, and her spirited head fit for a bronze cast of Atalanta.

He was an old man ; he could bear to pause and rightly appreciate the charm of scorn, the spur of irony, the goad of hatred. He knew the full value of its sharp spears to the wonder-blooming aloe.

He left the subject for a happier moment, and seating himself, opened his hands to warm them by the wood fire, still watching her with that smile, which for its very indulgence, its very banter, she abhorred.

“You lost your Norse-god as I prophesied ?” he asked carelessly.

He saw her whole face change as with a blow, and her body bend within itself as a young tree bends under a storm.

“He went when you gave him the gold,” she said below her breath.

“Of course he went. You would have him set free,” he said, with the little low laugh still in his throat. “Did I not say you must dream of nothing else if once you had him freed. You would be full of faith ; and unbar your eagle’s prison-house, and then, because he took wing through the open door, you wonder still. That is not very wise, Folle-Farine.”

“I do not wonder,” she said, with fierce effort

stifling her misery, "He had a right to do as he would: have I said any otherwise?"

"No. You are very faithful still, I see. Yet, I cannot think that you believed my prophecy, or you—a woman—had never been so strong. You think I can tell you of his fate? Nay, on my soul I know nothing. Men do not speak his name. He may be dead;—you shrink? So! can it matter so much? He is dead to you. He is a great man, but he is a fool. Half his genius would give him the fame he wants with much greater swiftness than the whole ever will. The world likes talent, which serves it. It hates genius, which rules it. Men would adore his technical treatment, his pictorial magnificence, his anatomical accuracy; but they will always be in awe of his intensity of meaning, of his marvellous fertility, of his extraordinary mingling of the chilliest of idealism, and the most unsparing of sensualities,—but I talk idly. Let us talk of you; see, I chose your likeness, and he let me have it—did you dream that he would part with it so lightly?"

"Why not? He had a million things more beautiful."

He looked at her keenly. He could measure the superb force of this unblenching and mute courage.

“In any other creature such an humility would be an hypocrisy. But it is not so in you. Why will you carry yourself as in an enemy’s house? Will you not even break your fast with me? Nay, that is sullen, that is barbaric. Is there nothing that can please you? See here,—all women love these; the gipsy as well as the empress. Hold them a moment.”

She took them; old oriental jewels lying loose in an agate cup on a table near; there were amongst them three great sapphires, which in their way were priceless, from their rare size and their perfect colour.

Her mouth laughed with its old scorn. She, who had lost life, soul, earth, heaven, to be consoled with the glass beads of a bauble! This man seemed to her more foolish than any creature that had ever spoken on her ear.

She looked, then laid them—indifferently—down.

“Three sparrow’s eggs are as big and almost as blue, among the moss in any month of May!”

He moved them away, chagrined.

“How do you intend to live?” he asked, drily.

“It will come as it comes,” she answered with the fatalism and composure that ran in her eastern blood.

“What have you done up to this moment since you left my house at Rioz?”

She told him, briefly; she wanted to hide that she had suffered aught, or had been in any measure coldly dealt with, and she spoke with the old force of a happier time, seeking rather to show how well it was with her that she should thus be free, and have no law save her own will, and knew that none lived who could say to her, “Come hither” or “go there.”

Almost she duped him, she was so brave. Not quite. His eyes had read the souls and senses of women for half a century; and none had ever deceived him. As he listened to her he knew well that under her desolation and her solitude her heart was broken—though not her courage.

But he accepted her words as he spoke them. “Perhaps you are wise to take your fate so lightly,” he said to her. “But, do you know that it is a horrible thing to be alone and penniless and adrift, and without a home or a friend, when one is a woman and young?”

“It is worse when one is a woman, and old; but who pities it then?” she said with the curt and caustic meaning that had first allured him in her.

“And a woman is so soon old!” he added with as subtle a significance.

She shuddered a little ; no female creature that is beautiful and vigorous and young can coldly brook to look straight at the doom of age ; death is far less appalling, because death is uncertain, mystical, and may still have beauty.

“What do you intend to do with yourself?” he pursued.

“Intend ! It is for the rich ‘to intend,’ the poor must take what chances.”

She spoke calmly, leaning down on one of the cushioned benches by the hearth, resting her chin on her hand ; her brown slender feet were crossed one over another, her eyelids were heavy from weakness and the warmth of the room ; the soft dim light played on her tenderly ; he looked at her with a musing smile.

“No beautiful woman need ever be poor,” he said, slowly spreading out the delicate palms of his hands to the fire ; “and you are beautiful—exceedingly.”

“I know!” she gave a quick gesture of her head, tired, insolent, indifferent ; and a terrible darkness stole over her face ; what matter how beautiful she might be, she had no beauty in her own sight, for

the eyes of Arslàn, had dwelt on her, cold, calm, unmoved, whilst he had said, "I would love you—if I could."

"You know your value," Sartorian said drily. "Well then, why talk of poverty and of your future together? they need never be companions in this world."

She rose and stood before him in the rosy glow of the fire that bathed her limbs until they glowed like jade and porphyry.

"No beautiful woman need be poor—no—no beautiful woman need be honest, I dare say."

He smiled, holding his delicate palms to the warmth of his hearth.

"Your lover drew a grand vision of Barabbas. Well—we choose Barabbas still, just as Jerusalem chose; only now, our Barabbas is most often a woman. Why do you rise? It is a wet day, out there, and, for the spring time, cold."

"Is it?"

"And you have been ill?"

"So they say."

"You will die of cold and exposure."

"So best."

"Wait a moment. In such weather I would not let a dog stir."

“ You would if the dog chose to go.”

“ To a master who forsook it—for a kick and a curse ?”

Her face burned ; she hung her head instinctively. She sank down again on the seat which she had quitted. The old horror of shame which she had felt by the water side under the orchards bent her strength under this man’s unmerciful pressure. She knew that he had her secret, and the haughty passion and courage of her nature writhed under his taunt of it.

“ To refuse to stay is uncouth,” he said to her.

“ I am uncouth, no doubt.”

“ And it is ungrateful.”

“ I would not be that.”

“ Ungrateful ! I did what you asked of me. I unloosed your Othyr of Art to spend his strength as he will, in essaying to raise a storm blast which shall have force enough to echo through the endless tunnels of the time to come.”

“ You gave him a handful of gold pieces for *that* ! ”

“ Ah ! if you thought that I should offer him the half of my possessions you were disappointed, no doubt. But you forgot that ‘ that ’ would not sell in the world, as yet, for a handful of wheat.”

She touched the three sapphires.

“Are your blue stones of less worth, because I, being ignorant, esteem them no more value than three sparrow’s eggs in the hedge?”

“My poor jewels! Well, stay here to-night, you need rest, shelter, and warmth; and to-morrow you shall go as poor as you came, if you wish.” “The world is very hard. The world is always winter—to the poor,” he added carelessly, resting his keen far-reaching eyes upon her.

Despite herself she shuddered; he recalled to her that the world was close at hand—the world in which she would be houseless, friendless, penniless, alone.

“A hard world, to those who will not worship its gods,” he repeated, musingly. “And you astray in it, you poor barbarian, with your noble madness, and your blindness of faith and of passion. Do you know what it is to be famished, and have none to hear your cries?”

“Do I know?” her voice suddenly gathered strength and scorn, and rang loud on the stillness. “Do *you*? The empty dish, the chill stove, the frozen feet, the long nights, with the roof dripping rain, the sour berries and hard roots that mock hunger, the mud floors, with the rats fighting to get

first at your bed, the bitter black months, whose saints' days are kept by new pains, and whose holy days are feasted by fresh diseases. Do *I* know? Do *you*?"

He did not answer her; he was absorbed in his study of her face; he was thinking how she would look in Paris in some theatre's spectacle of Egypt, with anklets of dull gold and a cymar of dead white, and behind her a sea of palms and a red and sullen sky.

"What a fool he must have been," he thought, as his eyes went from her to the study of her sleeping in the poppies. "What a fool, he left his lantern of Aladdin behind him."

"You remember unlovely things," he said, aloud. "No, I do not know them; and I should not have supposed that you, who did, could so much have cared to know them more, or could have clung to them as the only good; as you now seem to do. You cannot love such hardships?"

"I have never known luxuries; and I do not wish to know them."

"Then you are no woman,—what is your idea of the most perfect life?"

"I do not know—to be always in the open air and to be quite free, and for ever to see the sun."

“Not a low ideal. You must await the Peruvian Paradise. Meanwhile there is a day spring that represents the sun not ill ; we call it Wealth.”

“Ah !” she could not deride this god, for she knew it was the greatest of them all ; when the rod of riches had been lost, had not the Far-Striking King himself been brought low and bound down to a slave’s drudgery ?

The small, keen, elfin, satiric face bent on her did not change from its musing study, its slow vigilant smile ; holding her under the subtle influence of his gaze, Sartorian began to speak, —speak as he could at choice, with accents sweet as silver, slow words persuasive as sorcery. With the terse, dainty, facile touches of a master, he placed before her that world of which she knew no more than any one of the reeds that blew by the sands of the river.

He painted to her that life of all others, which was in most vital contrast and unlikeness to her own ; the life of luxury, of indolence, of carelessness, of sovereignty, of endless pleasure, and supreme delight ; he painted to her the years of a woman rich, caressed, omnipotent, beautiful, supreme, with all the world before her from which to choose her lovers, her playthings, her

triumphs, her victories, her cruelties, and her seductions.

He painted the long cloudless invigorating day of such a favourite of fortune, with its hours winged by love and its laughter rhymed to music, and its wishes set to gold; the same day for the same woman, whether it were called of Rome or of Corinth, of Byzantium or of Athens, of Babylon or of Paris, and whether she herself were hailed hetaira or imperatrix. He drew such things as the skill of his words and the deep knowledge of his many years enabled him, in language which aroused her even from the absorption of her wretchedness, and stirred her dull disordered thoughts to a movement of restless discontent, and of strange wonder—Arslàn had never spoken to her thus.

He let his words dwell silently on her mind, awhile: then suddenly he asked her,

“Such lives are; Do you not envy them?”

She thought,—“envy them? she? what could she envy save the eyes that looked on Arslàn’s face?”

“What were the use?” she said aloud, “all my life I have seen that all things are for others; nothing is for me.”

“Your life is but just opening. Henceforth you shall see all things for you, instead.”

She flashed her eyes upon him.

“How can that be?”

“Listen to me; you are alone in the world, Folle-Farine?”

“Alone; yes.”

“You have not a coin to stand a day between you and hunger?”

“Not one.”

“You know of no roof that will shelter you for so much as a night?”

“Not one.”

“You have just left a public place of pestilence?”

“Yes.”

“And you know that everyone’s hand is against you because you are nameless and bastard, and come of a proscribed people, who are aliens alike in every land?”

“I am Folle-Farine; yes.”

For a moment he was silent. The simple, pathetic acceptance of the fate that made her name—merely because hers—a symbol of all things despised, and desolate, and forsaken, touched his heart and moved him to a sorrowful pity. But the pity died, and the cruelty remained alive behind it.

He bent on her the magnetic power of his bright, sardonic, meaning eyes.

“Well — be Folle-Farine still. Why not? But let Folle-Farine mean no longer a beggar, an outcast, a leper, a thing attainted, proscribed, and for ever suspected; but let it mean on the ear of every man that hears it the name of the most famous, the most imperious, the most triumphant, the most beautiful woman of her time; a woman of whom the world says, ‘Look on her face and die—you have lived enough.’”

Her breath came and went as she listened; the blood in her face flushed and paled; she trembled violently, and her whole frame seemed to dilate and strengthen and vibrate with the electric force of that subtlest temptation.

“I!” she murmured brokenly.

“Yes, you. All that I say you shall be: homeless, tribeless, nameless, nationless, though you stand there now, Folle-Farine.”

The wondrous promise swept her fancy for the moment on the strong current of its imagery, as a river sweeps a leaf. This empire hers?—hers?—when all mankind had driven and derided her and shunned her sight and touch, and cursed and

flouted her, and barely thought her worthy to be called "thou dog!"

He looked at her and smiled, and bent towards the warmth of the fire.

"All that I say you shall be; and—the year is all winter for the poor, Folle-Farine."

The light on her face faded; a sudden apprehension tightened at her heart; on her face gathered the old fierce deadly antagonism which constant insult and attack had taught her to assume on the first instant of menace as her only buckler.

She knew not what evil threatened; but vaguely she felt that treason was close about her.

"If you do not mock me," she said slowly, "if you do not—how will you make me what you promise?"

"I will show the world to you, you to the world; your beauty will do the rest."

The darkness and the perplexed trouble deepened on her face; she rose and stood and looked at him, her teeth shut together with a quick sharp ring, her straight proud brows drew together in stormy silence; all the tigress in her was awoke and rising ready to spring; yet amidst that dusky passion, that withering scorn of doubt, there was an innocent pathetic wonder, a vague desolation and dis-

appointment, that were childlike and infinitely sad.

“This is a wondrous pear you offer me!” she said bitterly. “And so cheap?—it must be rotten somewhere.”

“It is golden. Who need ask more?”

And he laughed his little low laugh in his throat.

Then, and then only, she understood him.

With a sudden unconscious instinctive action her hand sought her knife, but the girdle was empty; she sprang erect, her face on fire with a superb fury, her eyes blazing like the eyes of a wild beast's by night, a magnificence of scorn and rage upon her quivering features.

Her voice rang clear and hard and cold as ring the blows of steel.

“I ask more,—that I should pluck it with clean hands, and eat of it with pure lips. Strange quibble for a beggar,—homeless, penniless, tribeless, nationless? So you think, no doubt. But we who are born outlawed are born free,—and do not sell our freedom. Let me go.”

He watched her with a musing smile, a dreamy calm content; all this tempest of her scorn, all this bitterness of her disdain, all this whirlwind of her

passion and her suffering, seemed but to beguile him more and make him surer of her beauty, of her splendour, of her strength.

"She would be a great creature to show to the world," he thought, as he drooped his head and watched her through his half-closed eyelids, as the Red Mouse watched the sleeper in the poppies. "Let you go?" he said with that slow ironic smile—let you go? Why should I let you go—Folle-Farine?"

She stooped as a tigress stoops to rise the stronger for her death spring, and her voice was low, on a level with his ear.

"Why? Why? To save your own life—if you are wise."

He laughed in his throat again.

"Ah, ah! It is never wise to threaten, Folle-Farine. I do not threaten. You are foolish; you are unreasonable; and that is the privilege of a woman. I am not angered at it. On the contrary; it adds to your charm. You are a beautiful, reckless, stubborn, half mad, half savage creature. Passion and liberty become you,—become you like your ignorance and your ferocity. I would not for worlds that you should change them."

"Let me go," she cried, across his words.

“ Oh fool ! the winter will be hard,—and you are bare of foot,—and you have not a crust ! ”

“ Let me go.”

“ Ah ! Go ?—to beg your way to Paris, and to creep through the cellars and the hospitals till you can see your lover’s face, and to crouch a moment at his feet to hear him mutter a curse on you in payment for your pilgrimage ; and then to slit your throat or his—in your despair, and lie dead in all your loveliness in the common ditch.”

“ Let me go, I say ! ”

“ Or else, more like, come back to me in a week’s time and say, ‘ I was mad but now I am wise. Give me the golden pear. What matter a little speck ? What is golden may be rotten ; but to all lips it is sweet.’ ”

“ Let me go ! ”

She stood at bay before him, pale in her scorn of rage, her right hand clenched against her breast, her eyes breathing fire, her whole attitude instinct with the tempest of contempt and loathing, which she held down thus, passive and almost wordless, because she once had promised never to be thankless to this man.

He gazed at her and smiled, and thought how beautiful that chained whirlwind of her passions

looked ; but he did not touch her nor even go nearer to her. There was a dangerous gleam in her eyes that daunted him. Moreover he was patient, humorous, gentle, cruel, wise—all in one ; and he desired to tame and to beguile her, and to see her slowly drawn into the subtle sweetness of the powers of gold ; and to enjoy the yielding of each moral weakness one by one, as the southern boy slowly pulls limb from limb, wing from wing, of the cicala.

“ I will let you go—surely,” he said, with his low grim laugh. “ I keep no woman prisoner against her will. But think one moment longer, Folle-Farine. You will take no gift at my hands ? ”

“ None.”

“ You want to go,—penniless as you are ? ”

“ I will go so ; no other way.”

“ You will fall ill on the road afresh.”

“ That does not concern you.”

“ You will starve.”

“ That is my question.”

“ You will have to herd with the street dogs.”

“ Their bite is better than your welcome.”

“ You will be suspected,—most likely imprisoned. You are an outcast.”

“ That may be.”

“ You will be driven to public charity.”

“Not till I need a public grave.”

“You will have never a glance of pity, never a look of softness, from your northern god; he has no love for you, and he is in his grave most likely. Icarus falls—always.”

For the first time she quailed as though struck by a sharp blow; but her voice remained inflexible and serene.

“I can live without love or pity, as I can without home or gold. Once for all,—let me go.”

“I will let you go,” he said slowly, as he moved a little away. “I will let you go in seven days’ time. For seven days you shall do as you please; eat, drink, be clothed, be housed, be feasted, be served, be beguiled—as the rich are. You shall taste all these things that gold gives, and which you, being ignorant, dare rashly deride and refuse. If when seven days end you still choose, you shall go, and as poor as you came. But you will not choose, for you are a woman, Folle-Farine!”

Ere she knew his intent he had moved the panel and drawn it behind him, and left her alone,—shut in a trap like the birds that Claudis Flamma had netted in his orchards.

That night, when the night without was quite dark, she knelt down before the study of the

poppies, and kissed it softly, and prayed to the unknown God, of whom none had taught her in anywise, yet whose light she still had found, and followed in a dim wondering imperfect fashion, as a little child lost in the twilight of some pathless wood, pursues in trembling the gleam of some great still planet looming far above her through the leaves.

When she arose from her supplication, her choice was already made.

And the Red Mouse had no power on her, because of her great love.





CHAPTER IV.

AT sunrise a great peacock trailing his imperial purple on the edge of a smooth lawn, pecked angrily at a torn fragment of a scarlet scarf; a scarf that had been woven in his own eastern lands, but which incensed his sight, fluttering there so idly, as it seemed, on the feathery sprays of a little low almond tree that grew by the water's edge.

The water was broad, and full of lily leaves and of rare reeds and rushes; it had been so stemmed and turned by art that it washed the basement walls and mirrored the graceful galleries and arches of the garden palace, where the bird of Hêrê dwelt.

Twenty feet above the level of the gardens, where the peacock swept in the light, there was an open casement, a narrow balcony of stone; a group of pale human faces looking out awe-

stricken. A leap in the night—the night wet and moonless,—waters a fathom deep,—a bed of sand treacherous and shifting as the ways of love. What could all these be save certain death? Of death they were afraid; but they were more afraid yet of the vengeance of their flute-voiced lord.

On the wall the Red Mouse sat amongst the flowers of sleep; he could have told; he who for once had heard another prayer than the blasphemies of the Brocken.

But the Red Mouse never tells any secret to men; he has lived too long in the breast of the women whom men love.

The sun came from the east, and passed through the pale stricken faces that watched from the casement, and came straight to where the Red Mouse sat amidst the poppies.

“Have you let a female soul escape you?” said the Sun.

The Red Mouse answered.

“Love is stronger than I. When he keeps his hands pure, where he guards the door of the soul, I enter not. I sit outside and watch, and watch, and watch. But it is time lost. Love is strong; the door is barred to me.”

Said the Sun,

“That is strange to hear. My sister, the Moon, has told me oftentimes that Eros is your pander—always.”

“Anteros only,” said the Red Mouse.

The Sun, wondering, said again :

“And yet I have heard that it is your boast that into every female soul you enter at birth, and dwell there unto death. Is it, then, not so?”

The Red Mouse answered :

“The boast is not mine, it is man’s.”





CHAPTER V.

IN the dark of the night she had leapt to what, as she thought, would prove her grave; but the waters with human-like caprice had cast her back upon the land with scarce an effort of her own. Given back thus to life, whether she would or no, she by sheer instinct stumbled to her feet and fled as fast as she could in the wet gloomy night through the grassy stretches of the unknown gardens and lands in which she found herself.

She was weighted with her soaked clothes as with lead, but she was made swift by terror and hatred, as though Hermes for once had had pity for anything human, and had fastened to her feet his own winged sandals.

She ran on and on, not knowing whither; only knowing that she ran from the man who

had tempted her by the strength of the rod of wealth.

The rains were ceaseless, the skies had no stars, in the dense mist no lights, far or near, of city or planets, of palace or house, were seen. She did not know where she went ; she only ran on away and away, anywhere, from the Red Mouse and its master.

When the daybreak grew grey in the heavens, she paused, and trembling crept into a cattle shed to rest and take breath a little. She shrank from every habitation, she quivered at every human voice ; she was afraid—horribly afraid—in those clinging vapours, those damp deathly smells, those ghostly shadows of the dawn, those indistinct and unfamiliar creatures of a country strange to her.

That old man with the elf's eyes, who had tempted her, was he a god too, she wondered, since he had the rod that metes power and wealth ? He might stretch his hand anywhere, she supposed, and take her.

The gentle cattle in their wooden home made way for her, and humbly welcomed her. She hid herself amongst their beds of hay, and in the warmth of their breath and their bodies. She was wet and wretched, like any half drowned dog ; but the habits of her hardy life made cold and hunger and ex-

posure almost powerless to harm her. She slept from sheer exhaustion of mind and body. The cattle could have trodden her to death, or tossed her through the open spaces of their byres, but they seemed to know, they seemed to pity; and they stirred so that they did not brush a limb of her, nor shorten a moment of her slumbers.

When she awoke the sun was high.

A herdswoman, entering with the loud harsh clash of brazen pails, kicked her in the loins, and rated her furiously for daring to rest there. She arose at the kick, and went out from the place passively, not well knowing what she did.

The morning was warm and radiant; the earth and the trees were dripping with the rains of the night; the air was full of sweet odours, and of a delicious coldness. As far as she saw there was no token far or near of the gleaming cloud of the city of her dreams. She ventured to ask at a wayside cabin if she were near or far to Paris?

The woman of the cottage looked up searchingly from the seat before the porch, and for answer cried to her: "Paris! pouf—f—f! get out, you drowned rat."

She had lost for the time the mental force, and even the physical force, to resent or to persevere;

she was weak with hunger and bewildered with her misery. She had only sense enough left to remember—and be thankful—that in the night that was past she had been strong.

The sun beat on her head, the road was hard, and sharp set with flint; she was full of pain, her brain throbbed with fever and reeled with weakness; a sudden horror seized her lest she might die before she had looked again on the face of Arslàn.

She saw the dusky shade of a green wood; by sheer instinct she crept into it as a stricken deer into its sanctuary.

She sat in the darkness of the trees in the coolness of the wood, and rested her head on her hands, and let the big salt tears drop one by one, as the death tears of the llama fall.

This was the young year round her; that she knew.

The winter had gone by; its many months had passed over her head whilst she was senseless to any flight of night or day; death might have taken the prey which it had once been robbed of by her; in all this weary season, which to her was as a blank, his old foes of failure and famine might have struggled for and vanquished him, she not being

by; his body might lie in any plague-ditch of the blameless poor, his hand might rot fleshless and nerveless in any pit where the world cast its useless and dishonoured dead; the mould of his brain might make a feast for eyeless worms, not more stone blind than was the human race he had essayed to serve; the beauty of his face might be a thing of loathsomeness from which a toad would turn. Oh, God! would death never take her likewise? Was she an outcast even from that one tribeless and uncounted nation of the dead?

That God whom she had loved, whom she had chosen, whose eyes had been so full of pity, whose voice had murmured: "Nay, the wise know me as man's only friend":—even he, Thanatos, had turned against her and abandoned her.

Vague memories of things which she had heard in fable and tradition, of bodies accursed and condemned to wander for ever unresting and wailing of spirits, which for their curse were imprisoned in a living flesh that they could neither lose nor cast away so long as the world itself endured; creatures that the very elements had denied, and that were too vile for fire to burn, or water to drown, or steel to slay, or old age to wither, or death to touch and take in any wise. All these memories returned

to her, and in her loneliness she wondered if she were such an one as these.

She did not know, indeed, that she had done any great sin; she had done none willingly, and yet all people called her vile, and they must know?

Even the old man, mocking her, had said:

“Never wrestle with Fate. He throws the strongest, soon or late. And your fate is shame; it was your birth gift, it will be your burial cloth. Can you cast it off? No. But you can make it potent as gold, and sweet as honey if you choose, Folle-Farine.”

And she had not chosen; yet of any nobility in the resistance she did not dream. She had shut her heart to it by the unconscious instinct of strength, as she had shut her lips under torture, and shut her hands against gold.

She sat there in the wood, roofless, penniless, friendless, and every human creature was against her. Her tempter had spoken only the bare and bleak truth. A dog stoned and chased and mad could be the only living thing on the face of the earth more wretched and more desolate than herself.

The sun of noon was bright above head in a cloudless sky, but in the little wood it was cool and shady, and had the moisture of a heavy morning

dew. Millions of young leaves had uncurled themselves in the warmth. Little butterflies, some azure, some yellow, some white, danced in the light. Brown rills of water murmured under the grasses, the thrushes sang to one another through the boughs, and the lizard darted hither and thither, green as the arrowy leaves that made its shelter.

A little distance from her there was a group of joyous singers who looked at her from time to time, their laughter hushing a little, and their simple carousal under the green boughs broken by a nameless chillness and involuntary speculation. She did not note them, her face being bowed down upon her hands, and no sound of the thrushes' song or of the human singers' voices rousing her from the stupefaction of despair which drugged her senses.

They watched her long; her attitude did not change.

One of them at length rose up and went hesitating a step or two forwards; a girl with twinkling feet, clad gaily in bright colours, though the texture of her clothes was poor.

She went and touched the crouched sad figure, softly.

“Are you in trouble?”

The figure lifted its bowed head, its dark hopeless eyes.

“It is no matter, I am only—tired.”

“Are you all alone?”

“Yes.”

“Come and sit with us a moment. You are in the damp and the gloom; we are so pleasant and sunny there. Come.”

“You are good, but let me be.”

The blue-eyed girl called to the others. They lazily rose and came.

“Heaven! she is handsome!” the men muttered to one another.

She looked straight at them all, and let them be.

“You are all alone?” they asked her again.

“Always,” she answered them.

“You are going—where?”

“To Paris.”

“What to do there?”

“I do not know.”

“You look wet—suffering—what is the matter?”

“I was nearly drowned last night—an accident—it is nothing.”

“Where have you slept?”

“In a shed: with some cattle.”

“Could you get no shelter in a house?”

“I did not seek any.”

“What do you do? What is your work?”

“Anything—Nothing.”

“What is your name?”

“Folle-Farine.”

“That means the chaff;—less than the chaff,—the dust.”

“It means me.”

They were silent, only bending on her their bright curious eyes.

They saw that she was unspeakably wretched; that some great woe or shock had recently fallen on her, and given her glance that startled horror and blanched her rich skin to an ashen pallor, and frozen, as it were, the very current of the young blood in her veins.

They were silent a little space. Then whispered together.

“Come with us,” they urged. “We too go to Paris. We are poor. We follow art. We will befriend you.”

She was deaf to them long; being timid and wild of every human thing. But they were urgent; they were eloquent; these young girls with their bright eyes; these men who spoke of art; these wanderers who went to the great city.

In the end they pressed on her their companionship. They too were going to Paris; they spoke of perils she would run, of vouchers she would need: she wondered at their charity, but in the end walked on with them—fearing the Red Mouse.

They were mirthful gentle people, so she thought: they said they followed art; they told her she could never enter Paris nameless and alone: so she went. The chief of the little troop watched wonderingly her step, her posture, her barbaric and lustrous beauty, brilliant still even through the pallor of grief and the weariness of fatigue; of these he had never seen the like before and he knew their almost priceless value in the world, and of the working classes and street mobs of Paris.

“Listen,” he said suddenly to her. “We shall play to-night at the next town. Will you take a part?”

Walking along through the glades of the wood, lost in thought, she started at his voice.

“I do not know what you mean?”

“I mean—will you share yourself with us? We will give you no words. It will be quite easy. What money we make we divide amongst us. All you shall do shall be to stand and be looked at—you are beautiful and you know it, no doubt?”

She made a weary sign of assent. Beautiful? What could it matter if she were so, or if she were not, what these men thought of it? The beauty that she owned, though so late a precious possession, a crown of glory to her, had lost all its fairness and all its wonder since it had been strengthless to bind to hers, the only heart in which she cared to rouse a throb of passion, since it had been unworthy to draw upon it with any lingering gaze of love the eyes of Arslàn.

He looked at her more closely; this was a strange creature, he thought, who being a woman and in her first youth could thus acknowledge her own loveliness with so much candour, yet so much indifference.

That afternoon they halted at a little town that stood in a dell across the fields, a small place lying close about a great church tower.

It was almost dusk when they entered it; but it was all alive with lights and shows, and trumpets and banners; it was the day of a great fair, and the merry-go-rounds were whirling, and the trades in gilded cakes and puppets of sugar were thriving fast, and the narrow streets were full of a happy and noisy peasant crowd.

As soon as the little troop entered the first street a glad cry rose.

They were well known and well liked there ; the people clustered by dozens round them, the women greeting them with kisses, the children hugging the dogs, the men clamouring with invitations to eat and to drink and be merry.

They bade her watch them at their art in a rough wooden house outside the wine tavern.

She stood in the shadow and looked as they bade her, while the mimic life of their little stage began and lived its hour.

To the mind which had received its first instincts of art from the cold, lofty, passionless creations of Arslàn, from the classic purity and from the divine conception of the old Hellenic ideal, the art of the comic stage could seem but poor and idle mimicry ; gaudy and fragrantless as any painted rose of paper blooming on a tinselled stem.

The crystal truthlessness, the barbaric liberty, the pure idealism of her mind and temper revolted in contempt from the visible presentment and the vari-coloured harlequinade of the comic actor's art. To her, a note of song, a gleam of light, a shadowy shape, a veiled word, were enough to unfold to her passionate fancy a world of dreams, a paradise of

faith and of desire ; and for this very cause she shrank away, in amazement and disgust, from this realistic mockery of mere humanity, which left nothing for the imagination to create, which spoke no other tongue than the common language of human quips and jests. It could not touch her, it could not move her ; it filled her,—so far as she could bring herself to think of it at all,—with a cold and wondering contempt.

“That is your art?” she said wearily to the actors when they came to her.

“Well, is it not art ; and a noble one?”

A scornful shadow swept across her face.

“It is no art. It is human always. It is never divine. There is neither heaven nor hell in it. It is all earth.”

They were sharply stung.

“What has given you such thoughts as that?” they said, in their impatience and mortification.

“I have seen great things,” she said simply, and turned away and went out into the darkness, and wept,—alone.

She who had knelt at the feet of Thanatos, and who had heard the songs of Pan amidst the rushes by the river, and had listened to the charmed steps of Persephone amidst the flowers

of the summer ;—could she honour lesser gods than these ?

“ They may forget—they may forsake, and he likewise, but I never,” she thought.

If only she might live a little longer space to serve and suffer for them and for him still ; of fate she asked nothing higher.

That night there was much money in the bag. The players pressed a share upon her ; but she refused.

“ Have I begged from you ? ” she said. “ I have earned nothing.”

It was with exceeding difficulty that they ended in persuading her even to share their simple supper.

She took only bread and water, and sat and watched them curiously.

The players were in high spirits ; their chief ordered a stoup of bright wine, and made merry over it with gayer songs and louder laughter, and more frequent jests than even were his wont.

The men and women of the town came in and out with merry interchange of words. The youths of the little bourg chattered light amorous nonsense ; the young girls smiled and chattered in answer ; whilst the actors bantered them and made them a hundred love prophecies.

Now and then a dog trotted in to salute the players' poodles ; now and then the quaint face of a pig looked through the legs of its master.

The door stood open ; the balmy air blew in ; beyond, the stars shone in a cloudless sky.

She sat without in the darkness, where no light fell amongst the thick shroud of one of the blossoming boughs of pear trees, and now and then she looked and watched their laughter and companionship, and their gay and airy buffoonery, together there within the winehouse doors.

"All fools enjoy !" she thought ; with that bitter wonder, that aching disdain, that involuntary injustice, with which the strong sad patience of a great nature surveys the mindless merriment of lighter hearts and brains more easily lulled into forgetfulness and content.

They came to her and pressed on her a draught of the wine, a share of the food, a handful of the honeyed cates of their simple banquet ; even a portion of their silver and copper pieces with which the little leathern sack of their receipts was full, —for once,—to the mouth.

She refused all : the money she threw passionately away.

"Am I a beggar ?" she said, in her wrath.

She remained without in the gloom amongst the cool blossoming branches that swayed above-head in the still night, while the carousal broke up and the peasants went on their way to their homes, singing along the dark streets, and the lights were put out in the wine-house, and the trill of the grasshopper chirped in the fields around.

“You will die of damp, roofless in the open air this moonless night,” men, as they passed away, said to her in wonder.

“The leaves are roof enough for me,” she answered them: and stayed there with her head resting on the roll of her sheepskin; wide-awake through the calm dark hours; for a bed within she knew that she could not pay, and she would not let any charity purchase one for her.

At daybreak when the others rose she would only take from them the crust that was absolutely needful to keep life in her. Food seemed to choke her as it passed her lips,—since how could she tell but what his lips were parched dry with hunger or were blue and cold in death?

That morning, as they started, one of the two youths who bore their travelling gear and the rude appliances of their little stage upon his shoulders from village to village when they journeyed thus—

being oftentimes too poor to permit themselves any other mode of transit and of portorage—fell lame and grew faint and was forced to lay down his burden by the roadside.

She raised the weight upon her back and head as she had been wont to do the weights of timber and of corn for the mill-house, and bore it onward.

In vain they remonstrated with her ; she would not yield, but carried the wooden framework and the folded canvasses all through the heat and weariness of the noonday.

“ You would have me eat of your supper last night. I will have you accept of my payment to-day,” she said, stubbornly.

For this seemed to her a labour innocent and just, and even full of honour whatever men might say : had not Helios himself been bound as a slave in Thessaly ?

They journeyed far that day, along straight sunlit highways, and under the shadows of green trees. The fields were green with the young corn and the young vines ; the delicate plumes of the first blossoming lilacs nodded in their footsteps ; the skies were blue ; the earth was fragrant.

At noonday the players halted and threw them-

selves down beneath a poplar tree, in a wild rose thicket, to eat their noonday meal of bread and a green cress salad.

The shelter they had chosen was full of fragrance from rain drops still wet upon the grasses, and the budding rose vines. The hedge was full of honeysuckle and tufts of cowslips; the sun was warmer; the mild-eyed cattle came and looked at them; little redstarts picked up their crumbs; from a white vine-hung cottage an old woman brought them salt and wished them a fair travel.

But her heart was sick and her feet weary, and she asked always,—“Where is Paris?”

At last they showed it her, that gleaming golden cloud upon the purple haze of the horizon.

She crossed her hands upon her beating breast, and thanked the gods that they had thus given her to behold the city of his desires.

The chief of the mimes watched her keenly.

“You look at Paris,” he said after a time.

“There you may be great if you will.”

“Great? I?”

She echoed the word with weary incredulity. She knew he could but mock at her.

“Ay,” he made answer seriously. “Even you! Why not? There is no dynasty that endures in that

golden city save only one—the sovereignty of a woman's beauty."

She started and shuddered a little; she thought that she saw the Red Mouse stir amidst the grasses.

"I want no greatness," she said slowly. "What should I do with it?"

For in her heart she thought:

"What would it serve me to be known to all the world and remembered by all the ages of men if he forget—forget quite?"





CHAPTER VI.

THAT night they halted in a little bright village of the leafy and fruitful zone of the city—one of the fragrant and joyous pleasure-places amongst the woods where the students and the young girls came for draughts of milk and plunder of primroses, and dances by the light of the spring moon, and love-words murmured as they fastened violets in each other's breasts.

The next day she entered Paris with them as one of their own people.

“You may be great here, if you choose,” they said to her, and laughed.

She scarcely heard. She only knew that here it was that Arslàn had declared that fame—or death—should come to him.

The golden cloud dissolved as she drew near to it. A great city might be beautiful to others: to

her it was only as its gilded cage is to a mountain bird. The wilderness of roofs, the labyrinth of streets, the endless walls of stone, the ceaseless noises of the living multitude, these were horrible to the free-born blood of her; she felt blinded, caged, pent, deafened. Its magnificence failed to daunt, its colour to charm, its pageantry to beguile her. Through the glad and gorgeous ways she went, wearily and sick of heart, for the rush of free winds and the width of free skies, as a desert-born captive, with limbs of bronze and the eyes of the lion, went fettered past the palaces of Rome in the triumphal train of Africanus or Pompeius.

The little band with which she travelled wondered what her eyes so incessantly looked for, in that perpetual intentness with which they searched every knot of faces that was gathered together as a swarm of bees clusters in the sunshine. They could not tell; they only saw that her eyes never lost that look.

“Is it the Past or the Future that you search for always?” the shrewdest of them asked her.

She shuddered a little, and made him no answer. How could she tell which it was? — whether it would be a public fame or a nameless grave that she would light on at the last?

She was a mystery to them.

She minded poverty so little. She was as content on a draught of water and a bunch of cress as others are on rarest meats and wines. She bore bodily fatigue with an Arab's endurance and indifference. She seemed to care little whether suns beat on her, or storms drenched her to the bone ; whether she slept under a roof, or the boughs of a tree ; whether the people hissed her for a foreign thing of foul omen, or clamoured aloud in the streets praise of her perfect face. She cared nothing.

She was silent always, and she never smiled.

"I must keep my liberty!" she had said ; and she kept it.

By night she toiled ceaselessly for her new masters ; docile, patient, enduring, laborious, bearing the yoke of this labour as she had borne that of her former slavery, rather than owe a crust to alms, a coin to the gaze of a crowd. But by day she searched the city ceaselessly and alone, wandering, wandering, wandering, always on a quest that was never ended.

For amidst the millions of faces that met her gaze, Arslan's was not ; and she was too solitary, too ignorant, and locked her secret too tenaciously in her heart, to be able to learn tidings of his name.

So the months of the spring and the summer time went by: it was very strange and wondrous to her.

The human world seemed suddenly all about her; the quiet earth, on which the cattle grazed, and the women threshed and ploughed, and the sheep browsed the thyme, and the mists swept from stream to sea, this was all gone; and in its stead there was a world of tumult, colour, noise, change, riot, roofs piled on roofs, clouds of dust yellow in the sun, walls peopled with countless heads of flowers and of women; throngs, various of hue as garden-beds of blown anemones; endless harmonies and discords always rung together from silver bells, and brazen trumpets, and the clash of arms, and the spray of waters, and the screams of anguish, and the laughs of mirth, and the shrill pipes of an endless revelry, and the hollow sighs of a woe that had no rest.

For the world of a great city, of "the world as it is man's," was all about her; and she loathed it, and sickened in it, and hid her face from it whenever she could, and dreamed, as poets dream in fever of pathless seas and tawny fields of weeds, and dim woods filled with the song of birds, and cool skies brooding over a purple moor, and all the

silence and the loveliness and the freedom of "the world as it is God's."

"You are not happy?" one man said to her.

"Happy!"

She said no more; but he thought, just so had he seen a rose-crested golden-eyed bird of the great savannahs look, shut in a cage in a showman's caravan, and dying slowly, with dulled plumage and drooped head, while the street mob of a town thrust their fingers through the bars and mocked it, and called to it to chatter and be gay.

"Show your beauty once—just once amidst us on the stage, and on the morrow you can choose your riches and your jewels from the four winds of heaven as you will," the players urged on her a hundred times.

But she refused always.

Her beauty—it was given to the gods, to take or leave, in life or death, for him.

The months went on; she searched for him always. A horrible unending vigil that never seemed nearer its end. Vainly, day by day, she searched the crowds and the solitudes, the gates of the palaces and the vaults of the cellars. She thought she saw him a thousand times; but she could never tell whether it were truth or fancy.

She never met him face to face : she never heard his name. There is no desert wider, no maze more unending, than a great city.

She ran hideous peril with every moment that she lived ; but by the strength and the love that dwelt together in her she escaped them. Her sad, wide, open, pathetic eyes searched only for his face and saw no other ; her ear, ever strained to listen for one voice, was dead to every accent of persuasion or of passion.

When men tried to tell her she was beautiful, she looked them full in the eyes and laughed, a terrible dreary laugh of scorn that chilled them to the bone. When the gay groups on balconies, that glanced golden in the sun, flung sweetmeats at her, and dashed wine on the ground, and called to her for her beauty's sake to join them, she looked at them with a look that had neither envy nor repugnance in it, but only a cold mute weariness of contempt.

One day a great sculptor waylaid her, and showed her a pouch full of money and precious stones. "All that, and more, you shall have, if you will let me make a cast of your face and your body once." In answer, she showed him the edge of her hidden knife.

One day a young man, unlike to all the ragged and toil-worn crowds that alone beheld her, came in those crowded quarters of the poor, and watched her with eyes aglow like those of the youth in the old market-square about the cathedral, and waylaid her, later, in solitude, and slid in her palm a chain studded with precious stones of many colours.

“I am rich,” he murmured to her. “I am a prince. I can make your name a name of power, if only you will come.”

“Come whither?” she asked him.

“Come with me—only to my supper-table—for one hour; my horses wait.”

She threw the chain of stones at her feet.

“I have no hunger,” she said, carelessly. “Go, ask those that have to your feast.”

And she gave no other phrase in answer to all the many honeyed and persuasive words with which in vain he urged her, that night and many another night, until he wearied.

One day, in the green outskirts of the city, passing by under a gilded gallery, and a wide window full of flowers, and hung with delicate draperies, there looked out the fair head of a woman, with diamonds in the ears, and a shroud of lace about it, while against the smiling scornful mouth a

jewelled hand held a rose ; and a woman's voice called to her, mockingly :

“ Has the devil not heard you yet, that you still walk barefoot in the dust on the stones, and let the sun beat on your head ? O fool ! there is gold in the air, and gold in the dust, and gold in the very gutter here, for a woman ! ”

And the face was the face, and the voice the voice, of the gardener's wife of the old town by the sea.

She raised, to the gilded balcony above, her great sorrowful musing eyes, full of startled courage : soon she comprehended ; and then her gaze gave back scorn for scorn.

“ Does that brazen scroll shade you better than did the trellised vine ? ” she said, with her voice ascending clear in its disdain. “ And are those stones in your breast any brighter than the blue was in the eyes of your child ? ”

The woman above cast the rose at her and laughed, and withdrew from the casement.

She set her heel on the rose, and trod its leaves down in the dust. It was a yellow rose, scentless and comely—an emblem of pleasure and wealth. She left it where it lay, and went onward.

The sweet sins, and all their rich profits, that she

might take as easily as she could have taken the rose from the dust, had no power to allure her.

The gilded balcony, the velvet couch, the jewels in the ears, the purple draperies, the ease and the affluence and the joys of the sights and the senses, these to her were as powerless to move her envy, these to her seemed as idle as the blow-balls that a child's breath floated down the current of a summer breeze.

When once a human ear has heard the whispers of the gods by night steal through the reeds by the river, never again to it can there sound anything but discord and empty sound in the tinkling cymbals of brass, and the fools' bells of silver, in which the crowds in their deafness imagine the songs of the heroes and the music of the spheres.

“There are only two trades in a city,” said the actors to her, with a smile as bitter as her own, “only two trades—to buy souls and to sell them. What business have you here, who do neither the one nor the other?”

There was music still in this trampled reed of the river, into which the gods had once bidden the stray winds and the wandering waters breathe their melody; but there, in the press, the buyers and sellers only saw in it a frail thing of the sand and the

stream, only made to be woven for barter, or bind together the sheaves of the roses of pleasure.

By-and-by they grew so impatient of this soul which knew its right errand so little that it would neither accept temptation itself nor deal it to others, they grew so impatient to receive that golden guerdon from passion and evil which they had foreseen as their sure wage for her when they had drawn her with them to the meshes of the city, that they betrayed her, stung and driven into treachery by the intolerable reproach of her continual strength, her continual silence.

They took a heavy price, and betrayed her to the man who had set his soul upon her beauty, to make it live naked and vile and perfect for all time in marble. She saved herself by such madness of rage, such fury of resistance, as the native tigress knows in the glare of the torches or the bonds of the cords.

She smote the sculptor with her knife ; a tumult rose round ; voices shouted that he was stabbed ; the men who had betrayed her raised loudest the outcry. In the darkness of a narrow street, and of a night of tempest, she fled from them, and buried herself in the dense obscurity which is one of the few privileges of the outcasts.

It was very poor, this quarter where she found refuge ; men and women at the lowest ebb of life gathered there together. There was not much crime ; it was too poor even for that. It was all that piteous, hopeless class that is honest, and suffers and keeps silent—so silent that no one notices when death replaces life.

Here she got leave to dwell a little while in the topmost corner of a high tower, which rose so high, so high, that the roof of it seemed almost like the very country itself. It was so still there, and so fresh, and the clouds seemed so near, and the pigeons flew so close about it all day long, and at night so trustfully sought their roost there.

In a nook of it she made her home : it was very old, very desolate, very barren ; yet she could bear it better than she could any lower range of dwelling.

She could see the sunrise and the sunset ; she could see the rain-mists and the planets ; she could look down on all the white curl of the smoke ; and she could hear the bells ring with a strange peculiar sweetness striking straight to her ear across the wilderness of roofs. And then she had the pigeons : they were not much, but they were something of the old fresh country life ; and now and then they brought a head of clover or a spray of grass in

their beaks ; and at sight of it the tears would rush into her eyes, and though it was pain, it was yet a sweeter one than any pleasure that she had.

She maintained herself still without alms, buying her right to live there, and the little food that sufficed for her, by one of those offices in which the very poor contrive to employ those still poorer than themselves.

They slept so heavily, those people who had the weight of twenty hours' toil, the pangs of hunger, and the chills of cold upon them, whenever they laid them down, and who would so willingly have slept for ever with any night they laid their heads upon their sacks of rags. But, so long as they woke at all, they needed to wake with the first note of the sparrows in the dark. She, so long used to rise ere ever the first streaks of day were seen, roused scores of them ; and in payment they gave her the right to warm herself at their stove, a handful of their chestnuts, a fragment of their crust, a little copper piece—anything that they could afford or she would consent to take. A woman, who had been the *reveilleuse* of the quarter many years, had died ; and they were glad of her :—" Her eyes have no sleep in them," they said ; and they found that she never failed.

It was a strange trade—to rise whilst yet for the world it was night, and go to and fro the dreary courts, up and down the gloom of the staircases, and in and out the silent chambers, and call all those sons and daughters of wretchedness from the only peace that their lives knew. So often she felt so loath to wake them; so often she stood beside the bundle of straw on which some dreaming creature, sighing and smiling in her sleep, murmured of her home, and had not the heart rudely to shatter those mercies of the night.

It was a strange sad office, to go alone amongst all those sleepers in the stillness that came before the dawn, and move from house to house, from door to door, from bed to bed, with the one little star of her lamp lone burning.

They were all so poor, so poor, it seemed more cruel than murder only to call them from their rest to work, and keep alive in them that faculty of suffering which was all they gained from their humanity.

Her pity for them grew so great that her heart perforce softened to them also. Those strong men gaunt with famine, those white women with their starved children on their breasts, those young maidens worn blind over the needle or the potter's

clay, those little children who staggered up in the dark to go to the furnace, or the wheel, or the powder-mill, or the potato-fields outside the walls,—she could neither fear them nor hate them, nor do aught save sorrow for them with a dumb, passionate, wondering grief.

She saw these people despised for no shame, wretched for no sin, suffering eternally, though guilty of no other fault than that of being in too large numbers on an earth too small for the enormous burden of its endless woe. She found that she had companions in her misery, and that she was not alone under that bitter scorn which had been poured on her. In a manner she grew to care for these human creatures, all strangers, yet whose solitude she entered, and whose rest she roused. It was a human interest, a human sympathy. It drew her from the despair that had closed around her.

And some of these in turn loved her.

Neither poverty nor wretchedness could dull the lustrous, deep-hued, flowerlike beauty that was hers by nature. As she ascended the dark stone stairs with the little candle raised above her head, and knocking low entered the place where they slept, the men and the children alike dreamed of strange shapes of paradise and things of sorcery.

“ When she wakes us the children never cry,” said a woman whom she always summoned an hour before dawn to rise and walk two leagues to a distant factory. It was new to her to be welcomed, it was new to see the children smile because she touched them. It lifted a little the ice that had closed about her heart.

It had become the height of the summer. The burning days and the sultry nights poured down on her bare head and blinded her, and filled her throat with the dust of the public ways, and parched her mouth with the thirst of over-driven cattle.

All the while in the hard hot glare she searched for one voice. All the while in the hard brazen din she listened for one voice.

She wandered all the day, half the night. They wondered that she woke so surely with every dawn; they did not know that seldom did she ever sleep. She sought for him always;—sought the busy crowds of the living; sought the burial grounds of the dead.

As she passed through the endless ways in the wondrous city; as she passed by the vast temples of art; as she passed by the open doors of the sacred places which the country had raised to the great memories that it treasured; it became clearer to her—this thing of his desires,—this deathless name amidst

a nation, this throne on the awed homage of a world for which his life had laboured and striven, and sickened for and endlessly desired.

The great purpose, the great end, to which he had lived grew tangible and present to her; and in her heart, as she went, she said ever, "Let me only die as the reed died;—what matter,—so that only the world speak his name?"

One night she stood on the height of the leads of the tower. The pigeons had gone to roost; the bells had swung themselves into stillness; far below the changing crowds were moving ceaselessly, but to that calm altitude no sound arose from them. The stars were out, and a great silver moon bathed half the skies in its white glory. In the stones of the parapet wind-sown blossoms blew to and fro heavy with dew.

The day had been one of oppressive heat. She had toiled all through it, seeking—seeking—seeking—what she never found. She was covered with dust; parched with thirst; foot-weary; sick at heart. She looked down on the mighty maze of the city, and thought—"how long—how long?"

Suddenly a cool hand touched her, a soft voice murmured at her ear.

Turning in the gloom she faced Sartorian. A

great terror held her mute and breathless there ; gazing in the paralysis of horror at this frail life, which was for her the incarnation of the world, and by whose lips the world said to her,—“ Come, eat and drink, and sow your garments with gems, and kiss men on the mouth whilst you slay them, and plunder and poison, and laugh and be wise. For all your gods are dead ; and there is but one god now—that god is gold.”

“ You must be tired, surely,” the old man said, with soft insistence. “ You never find what you seek ; you are always alone, always hungered and poor ; always wretched,—Folle-Farine. Ah ! you would not eat my golden pear. It was not wise.”

He said so little ; and yet—those slow subtle brief phrases pierced her heart with the full force of their odious meaning. She leaned against the wall, breathing hard and fast, mute, for the moment paralysed.

“ You fled away from me that night. It was heroic, foolish, mad. Yet I bear no anger against it. You have not loved the old dead gods for nought. You have the temper of their times. You obey them ; though they betray you and forget you,—Folle-Farine.”

She gazed at him, fascinated by her very loathing of him, as the bird by the snake.

“Who told you?” she muttered.

“Who told me, that you dwell here? The sun has a million rays; so has gold a million eyes; do you not know? There is nothing you have not done that has not been told to me. But I can always wait;—Folle-Farine. You are very strong; you are very weak, of course;—you have a faith; and you follow it; and it leads you on and on, on and on, and one day it will disappear—and you will plunge after it,—and it will drown you. You seek for this man and you cannot find even his grave. You are like a woman who seeks for her lover on a battle-field. But the world is a carnage where the vultures soon pick bare the bones of the slain, and all skeletons look alike, and are alike unlovely—Folle-Farine.”

“You came—to say this?” she said, through her locked teeth.

“Nay—I came to see your beauty, your ice-god tired soon; but I——. My golden pear would have been better vengeance for a slighted passion than this beggar’s quarter, and these wretched rags——.”

She held her misery and her shame, and her hatred alike down under enforced composure.

“There is no shame here,” she said, between her teeth. “A beggar’s quarter, perhaps; but these poor copper coins and these rags I earn with clean hands.”

He smiled with that benignant pity, with that malign mockery, which stung her so ruthlessly.

“No shame? Oh, Folle-Farine, did I not tell you, that, live as you may, shame will be always your garment in life and in death? You—a thing beautiful, nameless, homeless, accursed, who dares to dream to be innocent likewise! The world will clothe you with shame, whether you choose it or not. But the world, as I say, will give you one choice. Take its red robe boldly from it, and weight it with gold and encrust it with jewels. Believe me, the women who wear the white garments of virtue will envy you the red robe bitterly, then.”

Her arms were crossed upon her breast; her eyes gazed at him with the look he had seen in the gloom of the evening, under the orchards by the side of the rushing mill-water.

“You came—to say this?”

“Nay; I came to see your beauty, Folle-Farine. Your northern god soon tired, I say; but I——. Look yonder a moment,” he pursued; and he motioned downward to where the long lines of light gleamed

in the wondrous city which was stretched at their feet; and the endless murmur of its eternal sea of pleasure floated dimly to them on the soft night air. "See here, Folle-Farine: you dwell with the lowest; you are the slave of street mobs; no eyes see you except those of the harlot, the beggar, the thief, the outcast; your wage is a crust and a copper coin; you have the fate of your namesake, the dust, to wander a little while, and then sink on the stones of the streets. Yet that you think worthy and faithful, because it is pure, alike, of alms and of vice. Oh, beautiful fool! what would your lost lover say if beholding you here, amidst the reek of the mob and the homage of thieves? He would say of you the most bitter thing that a man can say of a woman: 'She has sunk into sin, but she has been powerless to gild her sin, or make it of more profit than was her innocence.' And a man has no scorn like the scorn which he feels for a woman who sells her soul—at a loss. You see?—ah! surely you see, Folle-Farine?"

She shook like a leaf where she stood, with the yellow and lustrous moonlight about her. She saw—she saw now! And she had been mad enough to dream that if she lived in honesty, and by labour that she loathed won back, with hands

clean of crime as of alms, the gold which he had left as the wage of her beauty, and found him and gave it to him without a word, he would at least believe — believe so much as this, that her hunger had been famine, and her need misery, and her homelessness that of the stray dog which is kicked from even a ditch, and hunted from even a graveyard: but that through it all she had never touched one coin of that cruel and merciless gift.

“You see?” pursued the low, flute-like moaning mockery of her tormentor’s voice. “You see? You have all the shame: it is your birthright; and you have nothing of the sweetness which may go with shame for a woman who has beauty. Now, look yonder. There lies the world, which when I saw you last was to you only an empty name. Now you know it—know it, at least, enough to be aware of all you have not, all you might have in it, if you took my golden pear. You must be tired, Folle-Farine,—to stand homeless under the gilded balconies; to be footsore in the summer dust amongst the rolling carriages; to stand outcast and famished before the palace gates; to see the smiles upon a million mouths, and on them all not one smile upon you; to show yourself hourly amongst a mob, that you may buy a little bread to eat, a

little straw to rest on ! You must be tired, Folle-Farine ! ”

She was silent where she stood in the moonlight, with the clouds seeming to lean and touch her, and far beneath the blaze of the myriad of lights shining through the soft darkness of the summer night.

Tired !—ah, God !—tired, indeed. But not for any cause of which he spake.

“ You must be tired. Now, eat of my golden pear ; and there, where the world lies yonder at our feet, no name shall be on the mouths of men as your name shall be in a day. Through the crowds you shall be borne by horses fleet as the winds ; or you shall lean above them from a gilded gallery, and mock them at your fancy there on high in a cloud of flowers. Great jewels shall beam on you like planets ; and the only chains that you shall wear shall be links of gold, like the chains of a priestess of old. Your mere wish shall be as a sorcerer’s wand, to bring you the thing of your idlest desire. You have been despised !—what vengeance sweeter than to see men grovel to win your glance, as the swine at the feet of Circe ? You have been scorned and accursed !—what retribution fuller than for women to behold in you the sweetness and magnificence of shame, and through you, envy, and

fall, and worship the Evil which begot you? Has humanity been so fair a friend to you that you can hesitate to strike at its heart with such a vengeance—so symmetrical in justice, so cynical in irony? Humanity cast you out to wither at your birth,—a thing rootless, nameless, only meet for the snake and the worm. If you bear poison in your fruit, is that your fault, or the fault of the human hands that cast the chance-sown weed out on the dunghill to perish? I do not speak of passion. I use no amorous phrase. I am old and ill-favoured; and I know that, any way, you will for ever hate me. But the rage of the desert-beast is more beautiful than the meek submission of the animal timid and tame. It is the lioness in you that I care to chain; but your chain shall be of gold, Folle-Farine; and all women will envy. Name your price, set it high as you will; there is nothing that I will refuse. Nay, even I will find your lover, who loves not you; and I will let you have your fullest vengeance on him. A noble vengeance, for no other would be worthy of your strength. Living or dead, his genius shall be made known to men; and, before another summer comes, all the world shall toss aloft in triumph the name that is now nothing as the dust is;—nothing as you are, Folle-Farine!”

She heard in silence to the end.

On the height of the roof-tops all was still; the stars seemed to beam close against her sight; below was the infinite space of the darkness, in which lines of light glittered where the haunts of pleasure lay; all creatures near her slept; the wind-sown plants blew to and fro, rooted in the spaces of the stones.

As the last words died softly on the quiet of the air, in answer she reached her hand upward, and broke off a tuft of the yellow wall-blossom, and cast it out with one turn of her wrist down into the void of the darkness.

“What do I say?” she said, slowly. “What? Well, this: I could seize you, and cast you down into the dark below there, as easily as I cast that tuft of weed. And why I hold my hand I cannot tell; it would be just.”

And she turned away and walked from him in the gloom, slowly, as though the deed she spake of tempted her.



CHAPTER VII.

THE poverties of the city devoured her incessantly, like wolves; the temptations of the city crouched in wait for her incessantly, like tigers. She was always hungry, always heart-sick, always alone; and there was always at her ear some tempting voice, telling her that she was beautiful and was a fool.

Yet she never dreamed once of listening, of yielding, of taking any pity on herself.

Was this virtue? She never thought of it as such; it was simply instinct; the instinct of a supreme fidelity, in which all slighter and meaner passions were absorbed and slain.

Once or twice, through some lighted casement in some lamp-lit wood, where the little gay boats flashed on fairy lakes, she would coldly watch that

luxury, that indolence, that rest of the senses, with a curl on her lips, where she sat or stood, in the shadow of the trees.

“To wear soft stuffs and rich colours, to have jewels in their breasts, to sleep in satin, to hear fools laugh, to have both hands full of gold, that is what women love,” she thought; and laughed a little in her cold wonder, and went back to her high cage in the tower, and called the pigeons in from the rooftops at sunset, and kissed their purple throats, and broke amongst them her one dry crust, and, supperless herself, sat on the parapet and watched the round white moon rise over the shining roofs of Paris.

She was ignorant, she was friendless, she was savage, she was very wretched; but she had a supreme love in her, and she was strong.

A hundred times the Red Mouse tried to steal through the lips which hunger, his servile and unfailing minister, would surely, the Red Mouse thought, disbar and unclothe to him sooner or later.

“You will tire, and I can wait, Folle-Farine,” the Red Mouse had said to her, by the tongue of the old man Sartorian; and he kept his word very patiently.

He was patient, he was wise; he believed in the

power of gold, and he had no faith in the strength of a woman. He knew how to wait—unseen, so that this rare bird should not perceive the net spread for it in its wildness and wariness. He did not pursue, nor too quickly incense, her.

Only in the dark cheerless mists, when she rose to go amongst the world of the sleeping poor at her threshold, she would step on some gift worthy of a queen's acceptance, without date or word, gleaming there against the stone of the stairs.

When she climbed to her hole in the roof at the close of a day, all pain, all fatigue, all vain endeavour, all bootless labour to and fro the labyrinth of streets, there would be on her bare bench such fruits and flowers as Dorothea might have sent from Paradise, and curled amidst them some thin leaf that would have bought the weight of the pines and of the grapes in gold.

When in the dusk of the night she went, wearily and footsore, through the byeways and over the sharp set flints of the quarters of the outcasts and the beggars, sick with the tumult and the stench and the squalor, parched with dust, worn with hunger, blind with the endless search for one face amidst the millions, going home—oh, mockery of the word!—to a bed of straw, to a cage

among the roofs, to a handful of rice as a meal, to a night of loneliness and cold and misery; at such a moment now and then through the gloom a voice would steal to her, saying:

“Are you not tired yet, Folle-Farine?”

But she never paused to hear the voice, nor gave it any answer.

The mill dust; the reed by the river; the nameless, friendless, rootless thing that her fate made her, should have been so weak, and so lightly blown by every chance breeze—so the Red Mouse told her; should have asked no better ending than to be wafted up a little while upon the winds of praise, or woven with a golden braid into a crown of pleasure.

Yet she was so stubborn and would not; yet she dared deride her tempters, and defy her destiny, and be strong.

For Love was with her.

And though the Red Mouse lies often in Love's breast, and is cradled there a welcome guest, yet when Love, once in a million times, shakes off his sloth, and flings the Red Mouse with it from him, he flings with a hand of force; and the beast crouches and flees, and dares meddle with Love no more.

In one of the first weeks of the wilder weather, weather that had the purple glow of the autumnal storms and the chills of coming winter on it, she arose, as her habit was, ere the night was altogether spent, and lit her little taper, and went out upon her rounds to rouse the sleepers.

She had barely tasted food for many hours. All the means of subsistence that she had were the few coins earned from those as poor almost as herself.

Often these went in debt to her, and begged for a little time to get the piece or two of base metal that they owed her; and she forgave them such debts always, not having the heart to take the last miserable pittance from some trembling withered hand which had worked through fourscore years of toil, and found no payment but its wrinkles in its palm; not having the force to fill her own platter with crusts which could only be purchased by the hunger cries of some starveling infant, or by the barter of some little valueless cross of ivory or rosary of berries long cherished in some aching breast after all else was lost or spent.

She had barely tasted food that day, worst of all she had not had even a few grains to scatter to the hungry pigeons as they had fluttered to her

on the house-top in the stormy twilight as the evening fell.

She had lain awake all the night hearing the strokes of the bells sound the hours, and seeming to say to her as they beat on the silence—

“Dost thou dare to be strong, thou? a grain of dust, a reed of the river, a Nothing?”

When she rose, and drew back the iron staple that fastened her door, and went out on the crazy stairway, she struck her foot against a thing of metal. It glittered in the feeble beams from her lamp.

She took it up; it was a little precious casket, such as of old the Red Mouse lurked in, amongst the pearls, to spring out from their whiteness into the purer snow of Gretchen's breast.

With it was only one written line.

“When you are tired,—Folle-Farine?”

She was already tired, tired with the horrible thirsty weariness of the young lioness starved and cramped in a cage in a city.

An old crone sat on a niche on the wall. She thrust her lean bony face, lit with wolf's eyes, through the gloom.

“Are you not tired?” she muttered in the

formula taught her. "Are you not tired, Folle-Farine?"

"If I be, what of that?" she answered, and she thrust the case away to the feet of the woman, still shut, and went on with her little dim taper down round the twist of the stairs.

She knew what she did, what she put away. She had come to know, too, what share the sex of her mother takes in the bringing to the lips of their kind the golden pear that to most needs no pressing.

"If I had only your face, and your chances," had said to her that day a serving-girl, young, with sallow cheeks, and a hollow voice, and eyes of fever, who lived in a den lower down on the stairway.

"Are you mad that you hunger here when you might hang yourself with diamonds like our Lady of Atocha?" cried a dancing-woman with sullen eyes and a yellow skin from the hither side of the mountains, who begged in the streets all day.

So, many tongues hissed to her in different fashions. It seemed to many of them impious in one like her to dare be stronger than the gold was that assailed her, to dare to live up there among the clouds; and hunger, and thirst, and

keep her silence, and strike dumb all the mouths that tried to woo her down, and shake aside all the hands that strove softly to slide their purchase-monies into hers.

For they chimed in chorus as the bells did :

“Strength in the dust—in a reed—in a Nothing ? ”

It was a bitter windy morning ; the rain fell heavily ; there were no stars out, and the air was sharp and raw. She was too used to all changes of weather to take heed of it, but her thin clothes were soaked through, and her hair was drenched as she crossed the courts and traversed the passages to reach her various employers.

The first she roused was a poor sickly woman sleeping feverishly on an old rope mat ; the second an old man wrestling with nightmare as the rain poured on him through a hole in the roof, making him dream that he was drowning.

The third was a woman so old that her quarter accredited her with a century of age ; she woke mumbling that it was hard at her years to have to go and pick rags for a crumb of bread.

The fourth was a little child not seven ; he was an orphan, and the people who kept him sent him out to get herbs in the outlying villages to sell in

the streets, and beat him if he let other children be beforehand with him. He woke sobbing; he had dreamed of his dead mother, and cried out that it was so cold, so cold.

There were scores like them at whose doors she knocked, or whose chambers she entered. The brief kind night was over, and they had to arise and work,—or die.

“Why do they not die?” she wondered; and she thought of the dear gods that she had loved, the gods of oblivion.

Truly there were no gifts like their gifts; and yet men knew their worth so little!—but thrust Hypnos back in scorn, dashing their wine-cups in his eyes; and mocked Oneiros, calling him the guest of love-sick fools and of mad poets; and against Thanatos strove always in hatred and terror as against their dreaded foe.

It was a strange melancholy dreary labour this into which she had entered.

It was all dark. The little light she bore scarcely shed its rays beyond her feet. It was all still. The winds sounded infinitely sad amongst those vaulted passages and the deep shafts of the stairways. Now and then a woman's voice in prayer or a man's in blasphemy echoed dully through the old half-

ruined buildings. Otherwise an intense silence reigned there, where all save herself were sleeping.

She used to think it was a city of the dead, in which she alone was living.

And sometimes she had not the heart to waken them; when there was a smile on some wan, worn face that never knew one in its waking hours; or when some childless mother in her lonely bed in sleeping fancy drew young arms about her throat.

This morning when all her tasks were done, and all the toilers summoned to another day of pain, she retraced her steps slowly, bearing the light aloft, and with its feeble rays shed on the colourless splendour of her face, and on her luminous dilated troubled eyes that were for ever seeking what they never found.

A long vaulted passage stretched between her and the foot of the steps that led to the tower; many doors opened on it, the winds wailed through it, and the ragged clothes of the tenants blew to and fro upon the swaying cords. She traversed it, and slowly mounted her own staircase, which was spiral and narrow, with little loopholes ever and again that looked out upon the walls, and higher on the roofs, and higher yet upon the open sky. By one of these she paused and looked out wearily.

It was dark still ; great low rain-clouds floated by ; a little caged bird stirred with a sad note ; mighty rains swept by from the westward, sweet with the smell of the distant fields.

Her heart ached for the country.

It was so still there in the dusk she knew, even in this wild autumn night, which there would be so purple with leaf shadow, so brown with embracing branches, so grey with silvery faint mists, so lily white with virgin snows. Ah, God ! to reach it once again, she thought, if only to die in it.

And yet she stayed on in this, which was to her the deepest, hell, stayed on because he—in life or death,—was here.

She started as a hand touched her softly, where she stood looking through the narrow space. The eyes of Sartorian smiled on her through the twilight.

“Do you shrink still?” he said, gently. “Put back your knife ; look at me quietly ; you will not have the casket ?—very well. Your strength is folly ; yet it is noble. It becomes you. I do you good for ill. I have had search made for your lover, who loves not you. I have found him.”

“Living ?”

She quivered from head to foot ; the grey walls reeled round her ; she feared, she hoped, she doubted,

she believed. Was it hell? Was it heaven? She could not tell. She cared not which, so that only she could look once more upon the face of Arslàn.

"Living," he answered her, and still he smiled. "Living. Come with me, and see how he has used the liberty you gave. Come."

She staggered to her feet and rose, and held her knife close in the bosom of her dress, and with passionate eyes of hope and dread searched the face of the old man through the shadows.

"It is the truth?" she muttered. "If you mock me—if you lie—"

"Your knife will sheathe itself in my body, I know. Nay, I have never lied to you. One cannot wear a velvet glove to tame a lioness. Come with me; fear nothing, Folle-Farine. Come with me, and see with your own eyesight how the world of men has dealt with this your god."

"I will come."

Sartorian gazed at her in silence.

"You are a barbarian; and so you are heroic always. I would not lie to you, and here I have no need. Come; it is very near to you. A rood of stone can sever two lives, though the strength of all the world cannot unite them. Come."

She gripped the knife closer, and, with feet that stumbled as the feet of a dumb beast that goes out to its slaughter, followed him, through the dark and narrow ways. She had no fear for herself; she had no dread of treachery or peril; for herself she could be strong—always: and the point of the steel was set hard against her breast. But for him?—had the gods forgotten? had he forgot?

She was sick and cold and white with terror as she went. She dreaded the unknown thing her eyes might look upon. She dreaded the truth that she had sought to learn all through the burning months of summer, all through the horrors of the crowded city. Was it well with him, or ill? Had the gods remembered at last? Had the stubborn necks of men been bent to his feet? Was he free?—free to rise to the heights of lofty desire, and never look downward—in pity—once?

They passed in silence through many passage ways of the great stone hive of human life in which she dwelt. Once only Sartorian paused and looked back and spoke.

“If you find him in a woman’s arms—lost in a sloth of passion—what then? Will you say still, let him have greatness?”

In the gloom he saw her stagger as though struck

upon the head. But she rallied and gazed at him in answer with eyes that would neither change nor shrink.

“What is that to you?” she said, in her shut teeth. “Show me the truth: as for him—he has a right to do as he will. Have I said ever otherwise?”

He led the way onward in silence.

This passion, so heroic even in its barbarism, so faithful even in its wretchedness, so pure even in its abandonment, almost appalled him—and yet on it he had no pity.

By his lips the world spoke: the world which, to a creature nameless, homeless, godless, friendless, offered only one choice—shame or death; and for such privilege of choice bade her be thankful to men and to their deity.

He led her through many vaulted ways, and up the shaft of a stone stairway in a distant side of the vast pile, which, from holding many habitants of kings and monks and scholars, had become the populous home of the most wretched travellers of a great city.

“Wait here,” he said, and drew her backward into a hollow in the wall. It was nearly dark.

As she stood there in the darkness looking down

through the narrow space, there came a shadow to her through the gloom—a human shadow, noiseless and voiceless. It ascended the shaft of the stairs with a silent swift tread and passed by her and went onward; as it passed, the rays of her lamp were shed on it, and her eyes at last saw the face of Arslàn.

It was pale as death; his head was sunk on his breast; his lips muttered without the sound of words, his fair hair streamed in the wind; he moved without haste, without pause, with the pulseless haste, the bloodless quiet of a phantom.

She had heard men talk of those who being dead yet dwelt on earth and moved amidst the living. She had no thought of him in that moment save as amongst the dead. But he, dead or living, could have no horror for her; he, dead or living, ruled her as the moon the sea, and drew her after him, and formed the one law of her life.

She neither trembled nor prayed, nor wept nor laughed, nor cried aloud in her inconceivable joy. Her heart stood still, as though some hand had caught and gripped it.

She was silent in the breathless silence of an unspeakable awe; and with a step as noiseless as his own she glided in his path through the deep

shaft of the stairs, upward and upward through the hushed house, through the innumerable chambers, through the dusky shadows, through the chill of the bitter dawn, through the close hive of the sleeping creatures, up and up, into the very roof itself, where it seemed to meet the low and lurid clouds, and to be lifted from the habitations and the homes of men.

A doorway was open; he passed through it; beyond it was a bare square place through which there came the feeblest rays of dawn, making the yellow oil flame that burned in it look dull and hot and garish. He passed into the chamber and stood still a moment, with his head dropped on his chest and his lips muttering sounds without meaning.

The light fell on his face; she saw that he was living. Crouched on his threshold, she watched him, her heart leaping with a hope so keen, a rapture so intense, that its very strength and purity suffocated her like some mountain air too pure and strong for human lungs to breathe.

He walked in his sleep; that sleep so strange and so terrible, which drugs the senses and yet stimulates the brain: in which the sleeper moves, acts, remembers, returns to daily habits, and

resorts to daily haunts, and yet to all the world around him is deaf and blind and indifferent as the dead.

The restless brain, unstrung by too much travail and too little food, had moved the limbs unconsciously to their old haunts and habits; and in his sleep, though sightless and senseless, he seemed still to know and still to suffer. For he moved again after a moment's rest, and passed straight to the wooden tressels on which a great canvas was outstretched.

He sank down on a rough bench in front of it, and passed his hand before the picture with the fond caressing gesture with which a painter shows to another some wave of light, some grace of colour, and then sat there, stupidly, steadfastly, with his elbows on his knees and his head on his hands, and his eyes fastened on the creation before him.

It was a rugged, desolate, wind-blown chamber, set in the topmost height of the old pile, beaten on by all snows, drenched by all rains, rocked by all storms, bare, comfortless, poor to the direst stretch of poverty, close against the clouds and with the brazen bells and teeming roofs of the city close beneath.

She saw his face once more. She had dwelt by him for many weeks, and no sense of his presence had come to her, no instinct had awakened in him towards the love which clung to him with a faithfulness only as great as its humility.

She, praying always to see this man once more, and die—had been severed from him by the breadth of a stone as by an ocean's width; and he—doomed to fail always, spending his life in one endeavour, and by that one perpetually vanquished—he had had no space left to look up at a nameless creature with lithe golden limbs, about whose head the white-winged pigeons fluttered at twilight on the house-top.

His eyes had swept over her more than once; but they had had no sight for her; they were a poet's eyes that saw for ever in fancy faces more amorous and divine, limbs lovelier and more lily-like, mouths sweeter and more persuasive in their kiss, than any they ever saw on earth.

One passion consumed him, and left him not pause, nor breath, nor pity, nor sorrow for any other thing. He rested from his work and knew that it was good; but this could not content him, for this his fellow-men denied.

There was scarcely any light, but there was

enough for her to read his story by—the story of continual failure.

Yet where she hid upon the threshold her heart beat with wildest music of recovered joy: she had found him, and she had found him alone.

No woman leaned upon his breast; no soft tossed hair bathed his arms, no mouth murmured against his own. He was alone. Her only rival was that one great passion with which she had never in her humility dreamed to meet herself.

Dead he might be to all the world of men, dead in his own sight by a worse fate than any death could give: but for her he was living,—to her what mattered failure or scorn, famine or woe, defeat or despair?

She crouched upon his threshold now, and trembled with the madness of her joy, and courted its torture. She dared not creep and touch his hand, she dared not steal and kneel a moment at his feet.

He had rejected her. He had had no need of her. He had left her with the first hour that freedom came to him. He had seen her beauty, and learned its lines and hues, and used them for his art, and let it go again, a soulless thing that gave him no delight; a thing so slight that he had

thought it scarcely worth his while even to break it for an hour's sport. This was what he had deemed her ; that she knew. She accepted the fate at his hands with the submission that was an integral part of the love she bore him. She had never thought of equality between herself and him ; he might have beaten her, or kicked her, as a brute his dog, and she would not have resisted nor resented.

To find him, to watch him from a distance, to serve him in any humble ways she might ; to give him his soul's desire, if any barter of her own soul could purchase it,—this was all she asked. She had told him that he could have no sins to her, and it had been no empty phrase.

She crouched on his threshold, not daring to breathe aloud lest he should hear her.

In the dull light of dawn and of the sickly lamp she saw the great canvas on the tressels that his eyes, without seeing it, yet stared at ;—it was the great picture of the Barabbas, living its completed life in colour : beautiful, fearful, and divine, full of its majesty of godhead and its mockery of man.

She knew then how the season since they had parted had been spent with him ; she knew then, without any telling her in words, how he had given up all

his nights and days, all his scant store of gold, all leisure and comfort and peace, all hours of summer sunshine and of midnight cold, all laughter of glad places, and all pleasures of passion or of ease, to render perfect this one work by which he had elected to make good his fame or perish.

And she knew that he must have failed; failed always; that spending his life in one endeavour, circumstance had been stronger than he, and had baffled him perpetually. She knew that it was still in vain that he gave his peace and strength and passions, all the golden years of manhood, and all the dreams and delights of the senses; and, that although these were a treasure which once spent came back nevermore to the hands which scattered them, he had failed to purchase with them, though they were his all, this sole thing which he besought from the waywardness of fate.

“I will find a name or a grave,” he had said, when they had parted: she, with the instinct of that supreme love which clung to him with a faithfulness only equalled by its humility, needed no second look upon his face to see that no gods had answered him save the gods of oblivion;—the gods whose pity he rejected and whose divinity he denied.

For to the proud eyes of a man, looking eagle-wise at the far-off sun of a great ambition, the coming of Thanatos could seem neither as consolation nor as vengeance, but only as the crowning irony in the mockery and the futility of life.





CHAPTER VIII.

THE dawn grew into morning.

A day broke full of winds and of showers, with the dark masses of clouds tossed roughly hither and thither, and the bells of the steeples blown harshly out of time and tune, and the wet metal roofs glistening through a steam of rain.

The sleepers wakened of themselves or dreamed on as they might.

She had no memory of them.

She crouched in the gloom on his threshold, watching him.

He sank awhile into profound stupor, sitting there before his canvas, with his head dropped and his eyelids closed. Then suddenly a shudder ran through him; he awoke with a start, and shook off the lethargy which drugged him. He rose slowly to

his feet, and looked at the open shutters, and saw that it was morning.

“ Another day—another day ! ” he muttered, wearily ; and he turned from the Barabbas and flung himself face forward on his bed of straw.

Towards the form on his threshold he had never looked.

She sat without and waited.

Waited—for what ? She did not know. She did not dare even to steal to him and touch his hand with even such a timid caress as a beaten dog ventures to give the hand of the master who has driven it from him.

For even a beaten dog is a creature less humble and timid than a woman that loves and whose love is rejected.

He took up a palette ready set, and went to a blank space of canvas and began to cover it with shapes and shadows on the unconscious creative instinct of the surcharged brain. Faces and foliage, beasts and scrolls, the heads of gods, the folds of snakes, forms of women rising from flames and clouds, the flowers of Paradise blossoming amidst the corruption and tortures of Antenora. All were cast in confusion, wave on wave, shape on shape,

horror with loveliness, air with flame, heaven with hell, in all the mad tumult of an artist's dreams.

With a curse he flung his brushes from him, and cast himself face downward on his bed of straw.

The riot of fever was in his blood. Famine, sleepless nights, opiates with which he had lulled the pangs of vain desires, unnatural defiance of all passions and all joys, the pestilence rife in the crowded quarter of the poor,—all these had done their work upon him. He had breathed in the foul air of plague-stricken places, unconscious of its peril; he had starved his body, reckless of the flight of time; he had consumed his manhood in one ceaseless, ruthless, and absorbing sacrifice; and Nature, whom he had thus outraged, and thought to outrage with impunity as mere bestial feebleness, took her vengeance on him and cast him here, and mocked him, crying:—

“A deathless name?—Oh, madman. A little breath on the mouths of men in all the ages to come?—Oh, fool! Hereafter you cry?—oh, fool!—heaven and earth may pass away like a scroll that is burnt into ashes, and the future you live for may never come—neither for you nor the world. What you may gain—who shall say? But all you have

missed, I know. And no man shall scorn me—and pass unscathed.”

There came an old lame woman by, laboriously bearing a load of firewood. She paused beside the threshold.

“ You look yonder,” she said, resting her eyes on the stranger crouching on the threshold. “ Are you anything to that man ? ”

Silence only answered her.

“ He has no friends,” muttered the cripple. “ No human being has ever come to him ; and he has been here many months. He will be mad—very soon. I have seen it before. Those men do not die. Their bodies are too strong. But their brains go,—look you. And their brains go, and yet they live—to fourscore and ten many a time—shut up and manacled like wild beasts.”

Folle-Farine shivered where she crouched in the shadow of the doorway ; she still said nothing.

The crone mumbled on indifferent of answer, and yet pitiful, gazing into the chamber.

“ I have watched him often ; he is fair to look at—one is never too old to care for that. All winter, spring, and summer he has lived so hard ;—so cold too and so silent—painting that strange thing yonder. He looks like a king—he lives like a

beggar. The picture was his god:—see you. And no doubt he has set his soul on fame—men will. All the world is mad. One day in the spring time it was sent somewhere—that great thing yonder on the tressels,—to be seen by the world, no doubt. And whoever its fate lay with would not see any greatness in it, or else no eyes would look. It came back as it went. No doubt they knew best;—in the world. That was in the spring of the year. He has been like this ever since. Walking most nights;—starving most days:—I think. But he is always silent.”

The speaker raised her pails and went slowly, muttering as she limped down each steep stair:

“There must hang a crown of stars I suppose—somewhere—since so many of them for ever try to reach one. But all they ever get here below is a crown of straws in a madhouse.”

“The woman says aright,” the voice of Sartorian murmured low against her ear. She had forgotten that he was near from the first moment that her eyes had once more fed themselves upon the face of Arslân.

“The woman says aright,” he echoed, softly. This man will perish; his body may not die, but

his brain will—surely. And yet for his life you would give yours? ”

She looked up with a gleam of incredulous hope; she was yet so ignorant; she thought there might yet be ways by which one life could buy another's from the mercy of earth, from the pity of heaven.

“ Ah! ” she murmured with a swift soft trembling eagerness. “ If the gods would but remember!—and take me—instead. But they forget—they forget always.”

He smiled.

“ Ay, truly, the gods forget. But if you would give yourself to death for him, why not do a lesser thing?—give your beauty—Folle-Farine.”

A scarlet flush burned her from head to foot. For once she mistook his meaning. She thought—how could a beauty that he who perished there, had scorned, have rarity or grace in those cold eyes, of force or light enough to lure him from his grave?

The low melody of the voice in her ear flowed on.

“ See you—what he lacks is only the sinew that gold gives. What he has done is great. The world rightly seeing must fear it; and fear is the highest homage the world ever gives. But he is penniless; and he has many foes; and jealousy can

with so much ease thrust aside the greatness which it fears into obscurity, when that greatness is marred by the failures and the feebleness of poverty. Genius scorns the power of gold : it is wrong ; gold is the war scythe on its chariot, which mows down the millions of its foes and gives free passage to the sun-courers, with which it leaves those heavenly fields of light for the gross battle-fields of earth."

"You were to give that gold," she muttered, in her throat.

"Nay, not so. I was to set him free : to find his fame or his grave ; as he might. He will soon find one, no doubt. Nay ; you would make no bond with me, Folle-Farine. You scorned my golden pear. Otherwise—how great his genius is ! That cruel scorn, that burning colour, that ice-like coldness ! If the world could be brought to see them once aright, the world would know that no powers greater than these have been amongst it for many ages. But who shall force the world to look ?—who ? It is so deaf, so slow of foot, so blind, unless the film before its eyes be opened by gold."

He paused and waited.

She watched silent on the threshold there.

The cruel skill of his words cast on her all the weight of this ruin which they watched.

Her love must needs be weak, her pledge to the gods must needs be but imperfectly redeemed, since she, who had bade them let her perish in his stead, recoiled from the lingering living death of any shame, if such could save him.

The sweet voice of Sartorian murmured on :

“Nay; it were easy. He has many foes. He daunts the world and scourges it. Men hate him, and thrust him into oblivion. Yet it were easy!—a few praises to the powerful, a few bribes to the base, and yonder thing once lifted up in the full light of the world, would make him great—beyond any man’s dispute—for ever. I could do it, almost in a day; and he need never know. But, then, you are not tired,—Folle-Farine !”

She writhed from him, as the doe struck to the ground writhes from the hounds at her throat.

“Kill me!” she muttered. “Will not that serve you? Kill me—and save him !”

Sartorian smiled.

“Ah! you are but weak, after all, Folle-Farine. You would die for that man’s single sake,—so you say; and yet it is not him whom you love. It is yourself. If this passion of yours were great and pure, as you say, would you pause? Could you ask yourself twice if what you think your shame

would not grow noble and pure beyond all honour, being embraced for his sake? Nay; you are weak, like all your sex. You would die, so you say. To say it is easy; but to live, that were harder. You will not sacrifice yourself—so. And yet it were greater far, Folle-Farine, to endure for his sake in silence one look of his scorn, than to brave, in visionary phrase, the thrusts of a thousand daggers, the pangs of a thousand deaths. Kill you!—vain words cost but little. But to save him by sacrifice that he shall never acknowledge; to reach a heroism which he shall ever regard as a cowardice; to live and see him pass you by in cold contempt, while in your heart you shut your secret, and know that you have given him his soul's desire, and saved the genius in him from a madman's cell and from a pauper's grave—ah! that is beyond you; beyond any woman, perhaps. And yet your love seemed great enough almost to reach such a height as this, I thought.”

He looked at her once, then turned away.

He left in her soul the barbed sting of remorse. He had made her think her faith, her love, her strength, her sinless force, were but the cowardly fruit of cruelest self-love, that dared all things in words,—yet in act failed.

To save him by any martyrdom of her body or her soul, so she had sworn ; yet now !— Suddenly she seemed base to herself, and timorous, and false.

When daybreak came fully over the roofs of the city, it found him senseless, sightless, dying in a garret : the only freedom that he had reached was the delirious liberty of the brain, which, in its madness, casts aside all bonds of time and place and memory and reason.

All the day she watched beside him, there, amidst the brazen clangour of the bells and scream of the rough winds above the roofs.

In the gloom of the place, the burning colour of the great canvas of Jerusalem glowed in its wondrous pomp and power against all the grey, cold poverty of that wretched place. And the wanton laughed with her lover on the housetop ; and the thief clutched the rolling gold ; and the children lapped the purple stream of the wasted wine ; and the throngs flocked after the thief, whom they had elected for their god ; and ever and again a stray, flickering ray of light flashed from the gloom of the desolate chamber, and struck upon it till it glowed like flame ;—this mighty parable, whereby the choice of the people was symbolised for all time ; the choice eternal, which never changes, but for ever

turns from all diviner life to grovel in the dust before the Beast.

The magnificence of thought, the glory of imagination, the radiance of colour which the canvas held, served only to make more naked, more barren, more hideous the absolute desolation which reigned around. Not one grace, not one charm, not one consolation, had been left to the life of the man who had sacrificed all things to the inexorable tyranny of his genius. Destitution, in its ghastliest and most bitter meaning, was alone his recompense and portion. Save a few of the tools and pigments of his art, and a little opium in a broken glass, there was nothing there to stand between him and utter famine.

When her eyes had first dwelt upon him lying senseless under the gaze of the gods, he had not been more absolutely destitute than he was now. The hard sharp outlines of his fleshless limbs, the sunken temples, the hollow cheeks, the heavy respiration which spoke each breath a pang,—all these told their story with an eloquence more cruel than lies in any words.

He had dared to scourge the world without gold in his hand wherewith to bribe it to bear his stripes; and the world had been stronger than he, and had

taken its vengeance, and had cast him here powerless.

All the day through she watched beside him—watched the dull mute suffering of stupor, which was only broken by fierce unconscious words muttered in the unknown tongue of his birth-country. She could give him no aid, no food, no succour; she was the slave of the poorest of the poor; she had not upon her even so much as a copper piece to buy a crust of bread, a stoup of wine, a little cluster of autumn fruit to cool his burning lips. She had nothing,—she, who in the world of men had dared to be strong, and to shut her lips, and to keep her hands clean, and her feet straight; she, whose soul had been closed against the Red Mouse.

If she had gone down amongst the dancing throngs, and rioted with them, and feasted with them, and lived vilely, they would have hung her breast with gems, and paved her path with gold. That she knew; and she could have saved him.

Where she kneeled beside his bed she drew his hands against her heart—timidly, lest consciousness should come to him and he should curse her and drive her thence;—and laid her lips on them, and bathed them in the scorching dew of her hot tears,

and prayed him to pardon her if it had been weakness in her,—if it had been feebleness and self-pity thus to shrink from any abasement, any vileness, any martyrdom, if such could have done him service.

She did not know; she felt astray and blind, and full of guilt. It might be—so she thought—that it was thus the gods had tested her; thus they had bade her suffer shame to give him glory; thus they had tried her strength,—and found her wanting.

Herself, she was so utterly nothing in her own sight, and he was so utterly all in all; her life was a thing so undesired and so valueless, and his a thing so great and so measureless in majesty, that it seemed to her she might have erred in thrusting away infamy, since infamy would have brought with it gold to serve him.

Dignity, innocence, strength, pride—what right had she to these, what title had she to claim them—she who had been less than the dust from her birth upward?

To perish for him anyhow—that was all that she had craved in prayer of the gods. And she watched him now all through the bitter day; watched him dying of hunger, of fever, of endless desire, of continual failure,—and was helpless. More help-

less even than she had been when first she had claimed back his life from Thanatos.

Seven days she watched thus by him amidst the metal clangour of the bells, amidst the wailing of the autumn winds between the roofs.

She moistened his lips with a little water : it was all he took. A few times she left him and stole down amidst the people whom she had served, and was met by a curse from most of them ; for they thought that she tended some unknown fever which she might bring amidst them, so they drove her back and would hear naught of her. A few, more pitiful than the rest, flung her twice or thrice a little broken bread ; she took it eagerly, and fed on it, knowing that she must keep life in her by some food, or leave him utterly alone. For him she had laid down all pride ; for him she would have kissed the feet of the basest or sued to the lowest for alms.

And when the people—whose debts to her she had often forgiven, and whom she had once fancied had borne her a little love—drove her from them with harshest reviling, she answered nothing, but dropped her head and turned and crept again up the winding stairs to kneel beside his couch of straw, and wonder, in the bewildered anguish of

her aching brain, if indeed evil were good,—since evil alone could save him.

Seven days went by; the chimes of the bells blown on the wild autumn winds in strange bursts of jangled sound; the ceaseless murmur of the city's crowd surging ever on the silence from the far depths below; sunrise and moonrise following one another with no change in the perishing life that she alone guarded, whilst every day the light that freshly rose upon the world found the picture of the Barabbas, and shone on the god rejected and the thief adored.

Every night during those seven days the flute-like voice of her tempter made hated music to her ear. It asked always,—

“Are you tired,—Folle-Farine?”

Her ears were always deaf; her lips were always dumb.

On the eighth night Sartorian paused a little longer by her in the gloom.

“He dies there,” he said, slowly resting his tranquil, musing gaze upon the bed of straw. “It is a pity. So little would save him still. A little wine, a little fruit, a little skill,—his soul's desire when his sense returns. So little—and he would live, and he would be great; and the Barabbas

would scourge the secret sins of the nations, and the nations, out of very fear and very shame, would lift their voices loud and hail him prophet and seer."

Her strength was broken as she heard. She turned and flung herself in supplication at his feet.

"So little—so little; and you hold your hand!" Sartorian smiled.

"Nay; you hold your silence, Folle-Farine."

She did not move; her upraised face spoke without words the passion of her prayer.

"Save him!—save him! So little, so you say; and the gods will not hear."

"The gods are all dead,—Folle-Farine."

"Save him! You are as a god! Save him!"

"I am but a mortal,—Folle-Farine. Can I open the gates of the tomb, or close them?"

"You can save him,—for you have gold."

He smiled still.

"Ah! you learn at last that there is but one god? You have been slow to believe,—Folle-Farine."

She clung to him; she writhed around him; she kissed with her soiless lips the base dust at his feet.

“ You hold the keys of the world ; you can save the life of his body ; you can give him the life of his soul. You are a beast, a devil, a thing foul and unclean, and without mercy, and cruel as a lie ; and therefore you are the thing that men follow, and worship, and obey. I know !—I know ! You can save him if you will ! ”

She laughed where she was stretched upon the ground, a laugh that stayed the smile upon his mouth.

He stooped, and the sweetness of his voice was low and soft as the south wind.

“ I will save him, if you say that you are tired, —Folle-Farine.”

Where she was stretched face downward at his feet she shuddered, as though the folds of a snake curled round her, and stifled her, and slew her with a touch.

“ I cannot ! ” she muttered faintly in her throat.

“ Then let him die ! ” he said ; and turned away.

Once again he smiled,—and left her.

The hours passed ; she did not move ; stretched there, she wrestled with her agony as the fate-pursued wrestled with their doom on the steps of the temple, while the dread Eumenides drew round

them and waited—waiting in cold patience for the slow sure end.

She arose and went to Arslàn's side as a dying beast in the public roadway under a blow staggers to its feet to breathe its last.

“Let him die!” she muttered, with lips dry as the lips of the dead. “Let him die!”

Once more the choice was left to her. So men said: and the gods were dead.

An old creature, with a vulture's eyes and bony fingers, and rags that were plague-stricken with the poisons of filth and of disease, had followed and looked at her in the doorway, and kicked her where she lay.

“He owes me twenty days for the room,” he muttered, while his breath scorched her throat with the fumes of drink. “A debt is a debt. To-morrow I will take the canvas; it will do to burn. You shiver?—fool! If you chose, you could fill this garret with gold this very night. But you love this man, and so you let him perish while you prate of ‘shame.’ Oh-ho! that is a woman!”

He went away through the blackness and the stench, muttering, as he struck his staff upon each stair:

“The picture will feed the stove; the law will give me that.”

She heard and shivered, and looked at the bed of straw, and on the great canvas of the Barabbas.

Before another day had come and gone, he would lie in the common ditch of the poor, and the work of his hand would be withered, as a scroll withers in a flame.

If she tried once more? If she sought human pity, human aid? Some deliverance, some mercy,—who could say?—might yet be found, she thought. The gods were dead; but men—were they all more wanton than the snake, more cruel than the scorpion?

For the first time in seven days she left his side to go forth into the living world.

She rose and staggered from the garret, down the stairway, into the lower stories of the wilderness of wood and stone.

She traced her way blindly to the places she had known. They closed their doors in haste, and fled from her in terror.

They had heard that she had gone to tend some madman plague-stricken with some nameless fever; and those wretched lives to life clung closely, with a frantic love.

One woman she stayed, and held with timid, eager hands. Of this woman she had taken nothing all the summer long in wage for waking her tired eyes at daybreak.

“Have pity!” she muttered. “You are poor, indeed, I know; but help me. He dies there!”

The woman shook her off, and shrank.

“Get you gone,” she cried. “My little child will sicken if you breathe on her!”

The others said the same, some less harshly, some more harshly. Twice or thrice they added:

“You beg of us, and send the jewels back? Go and be wise. Make your harvest of gold whilst you can. Reap while you may in the yellow fields with the sharp sure sickle of youth!”

Not one amongst them braved the peril of a touch of pity; not one amongst them asked the story of her woe; and when the little children ran to her their mothers plucked them back, and cried:

“Art mad? She is plague-stricken.”

She went from them in silence, and left them and passed out into the open air.

In all this labyrinth of roofs, in all these human herds she yet thought, “Surely there must be some who pity?”

For even yet she was so young; and even yet she knew the world so little.

She went out into the streets.

Her brain was on fire, and her heart seemed frozen; her lips moved without sound, and unconsciously shaped the words which night and day pursued her, "A little gold—a little gold!"

So slight a thing, they said, and yet high above reach as Aldebaran, when it glistened through the storm wrack of the rain.

Why could he have not been content, as she had been, with the rush of the winds over the plains, the strife of the flood and the hurricane, the smell of the fruit-hung ways at night, the cool green shadows of the summer woods, the courses of the clouds, the rapture of the keen air blowing from the sea, the flight of a bird over the tossing poppies, the day song of the lark,—all these were life enough for her; were freedom, loveliness, companionship, and solace. Ah, God! she thought, if only these had made the world of his desires likewise. And even in her ghastlier grief her heart sickened for them in vain anguish as she went—these the pure joys of earth and air which were her only heritage.

She went out into the streets.

It was a night of wind and rain.

The lamps flickered through the watery darkness. Beggars and thieves and harlots jostled her in the narrow ways.

“It must be Hell—the hell of the Christians,” she muttered, as she stood alone on the flints of the roads, in the rancid smell, in the hideous riot, in the ghastly mirth, in the choking stench, in the thick steam of the darkness, whose few dull gleams of yellow light served to show the false red on a harlot’s cheek, or the bleeding wound on a crippled horse, or the reeling dance of a drunkard.

It was the hell of the Christians : in it there was no hope for her.

She moved on with slow unconscious movement of her limbs ; her hair blew back, her eyes had a pitiless wonder in their vacant stare ; her bloodless face had the horror in it that Greek sculptors gave to the face of those whom a relentless destiny pursued and hunted down ; ever and again she looked back as she went, as though some nameless, shapeless, unutterable horror were behind her in her steps.

The people called her mad, and laughed and hooted her ; when they had any space to think of her at all.

“ A little food, a little wine, for pity’s sake,” she murmured ; for her own needs she had never asked a crust in charity, but for his,—she would have kissed the mud from the feet of any creature who would have had thus much of mercy.

In answer they only mocked her, some struck her in the palm of her outstretched hand. Some called her by foul names ; some seized her with a drunken laugh, and cursed her as she writhed from their lewd hold ; some, and these often women, whispered to her of the bagnio and the brothel ; some muttered against her as a thief ; one, a youth, who gave her the gentlest answer that she had, murmured in her ear, “ a beggar ? with that face ? come tarry with me to-night.”

She went on through the sulphurous yellow glare, and the poisonous steam of these human styres, shuddering from the hands that grasped, the voices that wooed her, the looks that ravished her, the laughs that mocked her.

It was the hell of the Christians ; it was a city at midnight ; and its very stones seemed to arise and give tongue in her derision and cry, “ Oh, fool, you dreamt of a sacrifice which should be honour ; of a death, which should be release ; of a means whereby through you the world should hear the old

songs of the gods? Oh, fool! We are Christians here: and we only gather the reeds of the river to bruise them and break them, and thrust them, songless and dead, in the name of our Lord."

She stumbled on through the narrow ways.

After a little space they widened, and the lights multiplied, and through the rushing rains she saw the gay casements of the houses of pleasure.

On a gust of wind there came a breath of fragrance from a root of autumn blossom in a balcony. The old sweet woodland smell smote her as with a blow; the people in the street looked after her.

"She is mad," they said to one another, and went onward.

She came to a broad place, which even in that night of storm was still a blaze of fire, and seemed to her to laugh through all its marble mask, and all its million eyes of golden light. A cruel laugh which mocked and said:

"The seven chords of the lyre; who listens, who cares, who has ears to hear? But the rod of wealth all women kiss, and to its rule all men crawl; for ever. You dreamt to give him immortality?—fool! Give him gold—give him gold! We are Christians here: and we have but one God."

Under one of the burning cressets of flame there was a slab of stone on which were piled, bedded in leaves, all red and gold, with pomp of autumn, the fruit of the vine in great clear pyramids of white and purple ; tossed there so idly in such profusion from the past vintage time, that a copper coin or two could buy a feast for half a score of mouths. Some of the clusters rotted already from their over ripeness.

She looked at them with the passionate woful eyes of a dog mad with thirst, which can see water and yet cannot reach it. She leaned towards them, she caught their delicious coldness in her burning hands, she breathed in their old familiar fragrance with quick convulsive breath.

“He dies there !” she muttered, lifting her face to the eyes of the woman guarding her. “He dies there ; would you give me a little cluster, ever such a little one, to cool his mouth, for pity’s sake ?”

The woman thrust her away, and raised, shrill and sharp through all the clamour of the crowd, the cry of thief.

A score of hands were stretched to seize her, only the fleetness of her feet saved her. She escaped from them, and as a hare flies to

her form, so she fled to the place whence she came.

She had done all she could ; she had made one effort, for his sake ; and all living creatures had repulsed her. None would believe ; none would pity ; none would hear. Her last strength was broken, her last faint hope had failed.

In her utter wretchedness she ceased to wonder, she ceased to revolt, she accepted the fate which all men told her was her heritage and portion.

“It was I who was mad,” she thought, “so mad, so vain, to dream that I might ever be chosen as the reed was chosen. If I can save him, anyhow, what matter, what matter for me ? ”

She went back to the place where he lay—dying, unless help came to him. She climbed the stairway, and stole through the foulness and the darkness of the winding ways, and retraced her steps, and stood upon his threshold.

She had been absent but one hour ; yet already the last, most abject, most wretched penalty of death had come to him. They robbed him in his senselessness.

The night was wet. The rain dropped through the roof. The rats fought on the floor and climbed

the walls. The broken lattice blew to and fro with every gust of wind.

A palsied crone, with ravenous hands, sheared the locks of his fair hair, muttering, "They will fetch a stoup of brandy; and they would take them to-morrow in the dead-house."

The old man who owned the garret crammed into a wallet such few things of metal, or of wood, or of paper, as were left in the utter poverty of the place, muttering as he gathered the poor shreds of art, "They will do to burn; they will do to burn. At sunrise I will get help and carry the great canvas down."

The rats hurried to their holes at the light; the hag let fall her shears, and fled through an opening in the wall.

The old man looked up and smiled with a ghastly leer upon her in the shadows.

"To-morrow I will have the great canvas," he said, as he passed out, bearing his wallet with him. "And the students will give me a silver bit, for certain, for that fine corpse of his. It will make good work for their knives and their moulding-clay. And he will be dead to-morrow;—dead, dead."

And he grinned in her eyes as he passed her.

A shiver shook her ; she said nothing ; it seemed to her as though she would never speak again.

She set down her lamp, and crossed the chamber, and kneeled down beside the straw that made his bed.

She was quite calm.

She knew that the world gave her one chance—one only. She knew that men alone reigned, and that the gods were dead.

She flung herself beside him on the straw and wound her arms about him, and laid his head to rest upon her heart ; one moment—he would never know.

Between them there would be for ever silence. He would never know.

Greatness would come to him, and the dominion of gold ; and the work of his hands would pass amidst the treasures of the nations ; and he would live and arise and say, “ the desire of my heart is mine ; ”—and yet he would never know that one creature had so loved him that she had perished more horribly than by death to save him.

If he lived to the uttermost years of man, he would never know how, body and soul, she had passed away to destruction for his sake.

To die for him !

She laughed to think how sweet and calm such sacrifice as that had been.

Amidst the folded lilies, on the white waters, as the moon rose,—she laughed to think how she had sometimes dreamed to slay herself in such tender summer peace for him. That was how women perished when men loved, and loved enough to die with them, their lips upon each other's to the last. But she——

Death in peace; sacrifice in honour; a little memory in a human heart; a little place in a great hereafter; these were things too noble for her—so they said.

A martyrdom in shame; a life in ignominy—these were all to which she might aspire—so they said.

Upon his breast women would sink to sleep; amongst his hair their hands would wander, and on his mouth their sighs would spend themselves. Shut in the folded leaves of the unblossomed years some dreams of passion and some flower of love must lie for him—that she knew.

She loved him with that fierce and envious force which grudged the wind its privilege to breathe upon his lips, the earth its right to bear his footsteps, which was for ever jealous of the mere echo of

his voice, avaricious of the mere touch of his hand. And when she gave him to the future, she gave him to other eyes, that would grow blind with passion, meeting his; to other forms, that would burn with sweetest shame beneath his gaze; to other lives, whose memories would pass with his to the great Hereafter, made immortal by his touch: all these she gave, she knew.

Almost it was stronger than her strength. Almost she yielded to the desire which burned in her to let him die,—and die there with him,—and so hold him for ever hers, and not the world's; his and none other's in the eternal union of the grave, so that with hers his beauty should be consumed, and so that with hers his body should be shut from human sight, and the same corruption feed together on their hearts.

Almost she yielded; but the greatness of her love was stronger than its vileness, and its humility was more perfect than its cruelty.

It seemed to her,—mad, and bruised, and stunned with her misery,—that for a thing so worthless and loveless and despised as she to suffer deadliest shame to save a life so great as his was, after all, a fate more noble than she could have hoped.

For her—what could it matter?—a thing baser

than the dust,—whether the feet of men trampled her in scorn a little more, a little less, before she sank away into the eternal night wherein all things are equal and all things forgotten?





CHAPTER IX.

THAT night the moon found the Red Mouse, and said :

“ Did I not declare aright ? Over every female thing you are victorious—soon or late ? ”

But the Red Mouse answered :—

“ Nay, not so. For the soul still is closed against me ; and the soul still is pure. But this men do not see, and women cannot know ;—they are so blind.”





CHAPTER X.

FRE another year had been fully born, the world spoke in homage and in wonder of two things.

The one,—a genius which had suddenly arisen in its midst, and taken vengeance for the long neglect of bitter years, and scourged the world with pitiless scorn until, before this mighty struggle which it had dared once to deride and to deny, it crouched trembling; and wondered and did homage; and said in fear, “Truly this man is great, and truth is terrible.”

The other,—the bodily beauty of a woman; a beauty rarely seen in open day, but only in the innermost recesses of a sensualist’s palace; a creature barefooted, with chains of gold about her ancles, and loose white robes which showed each undulation of the perfect limbs, and on her breast the fires of a knot of opal; a creature in whose

eyes there was one changeless look, as of some desert beast taken from the freedom of the air and cast to the darkness of some unutterable horror; a creature whose lips were for ever mute, mute as the tortured lips of Læna.

One day the man whom the nations at last had crowned, saw the woman whom it was a tyrant's pleasure to place beside him now and then, in the public ways, as a tribune of Rome placed in his chariot of triumph the vanquished splendour of some imperial thing of Asia made his slave.

Across the clear hot light of noon the eyes of Arslân fell on hers for the first time since they had looked on her amidst the pale poppies, in the moonrise, in the fields.

They smiled on her with a cold, serene, ironic scorn.

"So soon?" he murmured, and passed onward, whilst the people made way for him in homage.

He had his heart's desire. He was great. He only smiled to think—all women were alike.

Her body shrank, her head dropped, as though a knife were thrust into her breast.

But her lips kept their silence to the last. They were so strong, they were so mute; they did not even once cry out against him: "For thy sake!"



CHAPTER XI.

IN the springtime of the year three gods watched by the river.

The golden flowers of the willows blew in the low winds; the waters came and went; the moon rose full and cold over a silvery stream; the reeds sighed in the silence.

Two winters had drifted by, and one hot drowsy summer since their creator had forsaken them, and all the white still shapes upon the walls already had been slain by the cold breath of Time. The green weeds waved in the empty casements; the chance-sown seeds of thistles and of bell-flowers were taking leaf between the square stones of the paven places; on the deserted threshold lichens and brambles climbed together; the filmy ooze of a rank vegetation stole over the

loveliness of Persephone and devoured one by one the divine offspring of Zeus; about the feet of the bound sun king in Pherœ and over the calm serene mockery of Hermes' smile the grey nets of the spiders' webs had been woven to and fro, across and across, with the lacing of a million threads, as Fate weaves round the limbs and covers the eyes of mortals as they stumble blindly from their birthplace to their grave. All things, the damp and the dust, the frost and the scorch, the newts and the rats, the fret of the flooded waters, and the stealing sure inroad of the mosses that everywhere grew from the dews and the fogs, had taken and eaten, in hunger or sport, or had touched, and thieved from, then left, gangrened and ruined.

The three gods alone remained; who being the sons of eternal night, are unharmed, unaltered, by any passage of the years of earth. The only gods who never bend beneath the yoke of years; but unblenchingly behold the nations wither as uncounted leaves, and the lands and the seas change their places, and the cities and the empires pass away as a tale that is told; and the deities that are worshipped in the temples alter in name and attributes and cultus, at the wanton will of the age which begot them.

In the still cold moonlit air their shadows stood together. Hand in hand ; looking outward through the white night mists. Other gods perished with the faith of each age as it changed ; other gods lived by the breath of men's lips, the tears of prayer, the smoke of sacrifice. But they,—their empire was the universe.

In every young soul that leaps into the light of life rejoicing blindly, Oneiros has dominion ; and he alone. In every creature that breathes, from the conqueror resting on a field of blood, to the nest bird cradled in its bed of leaves, Hypnos holds a sovereignty which nothing mortal can long resist and live. And Thanatos,—to him belong every created thing, past, present, and to come ; beneath his feet all generations lie ; and in the hollow of his hand he holds the worlds ; though the earth be tenantless, and the heavens sunless, and the planets shrivel in their courses, and the universe be shrouded in an endless night, yet through the eternal desolation Thanatos still will reign, and through the eternal darkness, through the immeasurable solitudes, he alone will wander, and he still behold his work.

Deathless as themselves their shadows stood ; and the worm and the lizard and the newt left

them alone and dared not wind about their calm clear brows, and dared not steal to touch the roses at their lips, knowing that ere the birth of the worlds these were, and when the worlds shall have perished these still will reign on :—the slow, sure, soundless, changeless ministers of an eternal rest, of an eternal oblivion.

A late light strayed in from the grey skies, pale as the primrose flowers that grew amongst the reeds upon the shore ; and found its way to them, trembling ; and shone in the far-seeing depths of their unfathomable eyes.

The eyes which spake and said :

“ Sleep, dreams, and death :—we are the only gods that answer prayer.”

With that faint gleam of the tender evening, there came across the threshold a human form, barefooted, bareheaded, with broken links of golden chains gleaming here and there upon her limbs, with white robes hanging heavily, soaked with dews and rains ; with sweet familiar smells of night-born blossoms, of wet leaves, of budding palm-boughs, of dark seed-sown fields, and the white flower foam of orchards, shedding their fragrance from her as she moved. Her face was bloodless as the faces of the gods ; her eyes had a look of blindness ; her lips

were close locked together ; her feet stumbled often, yet her path was straight.

She had hidden by day, she had fled by night ; all human creatures had scattered themselves from her in fear. She had made her way, blindly but surely, through the cool air ; through the shadows and the grasses ; through the sighing sounds of bells ; through the pastures, where the herds were grazing ; through the daffodils blowing in the shallow brooks ; through all the things for which her heart had been athirst so long, and which she reached—too late.

Too late for any coolness of fresh grass beneath her limbs to give them rest ; too late for any twilight song of missel-thrush or merle to touch her dumb dead heart to music ; too late for any kiss of clustering leaves to heal the shame that blistered on her lips and withered all their youth. And yet she loved them : loved them never yet more utterly than now when she came back to them, faithful as Persephone to the pomegranate flowers of hell.

She crossed the threshold, whilst the reeds that grew in the water by the steps bathed her feet and blew together against her limbs, sorrowing for this life so like their own, which had dreamed of the

songs of the gods, and had only heard the hiss of the snakes.

She fell at the feet of Thanatos.

The bonds of her silence were loosened ; the lips dumb so long for love's sake found voice, and cried out :

“How long ?—how long ? Wilt thou never take pity, and stoop and say ‘Enough ?’ I have kept faith ; I have kept silence to the end. The gods know. My life for his ; my soul for his. So I said ; so I have given. I would not have it otherwise. See : I am glad, I am proud, I am strong. See, I have never spoken. The gods have let me perish in his stead. Nay ; I suffer nothing. What can it matter for me ? Nay ; I thank thee that thou hast given my vileness to be the means of his glory. He is great, he has his desire ; and I—I am less than the dust. What matter ? He must not know ; he must never know. And one day I might be weak, or mad, and speak. Take me whilst still I am strong. A little while ago, in a space in the crowds, he saw me. ‘So soon !’ he said,—and smiled. And yet I live ! Keep faith with me ; keep faith at last. Slay me now, quickly, for pity's sake ; lest once I speak !”

Thanatos, in answer, laid his hand upon her lips ;

and sealed them, and their secret with them, mute for evermore.

She had been faithful to the end.

To such a faith there is no recompense of man, or of the gods, save only death.

On the shores of the river the winds swept through the reeds; and, sighing amidst them, mourned, saying:

“A thing as free as we, and as fair as ye, is dead; a thing whose joys were made, like ours, from song of the birds, from sight of the sun, from sound of the waters, from smell of the fields; from the tossing spray of the white fruit blossoms, from the play of the grasses at sunrise, from all the innocent liberties of earth and air. She has perished as a trampled leaf, as a broken shell, as a rose that falls in the public ways, as a star that is cast down an autumn night. She has died as the dust dies; and none sorrow. What matter? Men are wise, and gods are just, they say.”

The moon shone cold and clear. The breath of the wild thyme and the willow flowers was sweet upon the air. The leaves blew together, murmuring. The shadows of the clouds were dark upon the stream.

She lay dead at the feet of the Sons of Night.

The noisome creatures of the place stole away trembling ; the nameless things begotten by loneliness and gloom glided to their holes, as though afraid ; the blind newts crept into the utter darkness afar off ; the cool winds alone hovered near her, and moved her hair, and touched her limbs with all the fragrance of forest and plain, of the young year and the blossoming woods, of the green garden ways and the silvery sea.

The lives of the earth, and the air, and the waters, alone mourned for this life which was gone from amidst them ; free, even in base bondage ; pure, though every hand had cast defilement on it ; incorrupt, amidst corruption ;—for love's sake.

The Red Mouse sat without, and was afraid, and said :

“ To the end she hath escaped me.”





CHAPTER XII.

IN the springtide of the year three reapers cut to the roots the reeds that grew by the river.

They worked at dawn ; the skies were grey, the still and silvery stream flowed inward slowly ; the air was filled with the dreamy scent of white fruit blossoms ; in the hush of the daybreak the song of a lark thrilled the silence with music ; under the sweep of the steel the reeds fell.

Resting from their labours with the rushes slain around them, they—looking idly within—saw her lying there beneath the gaze of the gods of oblivion.

The gleam of the gold on her limbs conquered their fear. They ventured in and looked on her, and timorously touched her and turned her face to

the light of the coming day. Then they saw that she was dead.

“It is that evil thing of Yprés,” they muttered one to another; and stood looking at one and another and at her—afraid.

They spoke in whispers; they were sore afraid; it was still twilight.

“It were a righteous act to thrust her in a grave,” they murmured to each other at the last,—and paused.

“Ay, truly,” they agreed, “otherwise she may break the bonds of Death and rise again and haunt us always; who can say? But the gold——”

And then they paused again.

“It were a sin,” one murmured, “it were a sin to bury the pure good gold in darkness. Even if it come from hell——”

“The priests will bless it for us,” answered the other twain.

Against the darkened skies the lark was singing.

The three reapers waited a little, still afraid; then hastily, as men slaughter a thing they fear may rise against them, they stripped the white robes from her, and drew off the anklets of gold from her feet, and the chains of gold that were riven about her breast and limbs.

When they had stripped her body bare, they were stricken with a terror of the dead creature whom they had violated with their theft; and being consumed with dread lest any, as the day grew lighter, should pass by there and see what they had done, they went out in trembling haste, and together dug deep down into the wet sands, where the reeds grew, and dragged her naked body to the air, and thrust it down there, into its nameless grave, and covered it, and left it to the rising of the tide.

Then, with the gold, they hurried to their homes, leaving the reeds which they had reaped to wither in the sunrise.

The waters rose and smoothed the ruffled soil, and rippled in a sheet of silver over the shore, and effaced all traces of their work; so that no man knew this thing which they had done.

In her life as in her death she was nameless, friendless, and alone.

The reeds blew together by the river, now red in the daybreak, now white in the moonrise, and the winds sighed through them wearily, for they were songless, and the gods were dead.

The seasons came and went; the waters rose and sank; in the golden flowers of the willows the young birds made music with their wings; the soft-

footed things of brake and bush stole through the leaves, and drank at the edge of the stream, and fled away over the wet grey sand: the people passed down the slow current of the tides with lily-sheaves of the flowering spring, with ruddy fruitage of the summer meads, with yellow harvest of the autumn fields, passed singing, smiting the reaper rushes as they went.

But none paused there.

For Thanatos alone knew. Thanatos who watched by day and night the slain reeds sigh, fruitless and rootless, in the empty air; Thanatos, who by the cold, sad patience of his gaze, spake, saying:

“I am the only pity of the world. And even I, —to every mortal thing I come, too early, or too late.”

THE END.

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